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# Inhabiting God's Dream: A Universal Oxherder's Quest

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INHABITING GOD'S DREAM: A UNIVERSAL OXHERDER'S QUEST

By

Benjamin J. Wielechowski

THESIS

Submitted to  
Northern Michigan University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Graduate Studies Office

2009

## SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Benjamin J. Wielechowski is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Associate Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies.

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## ABSTRACT

### INHABITING GOD’S DREAM: A UNIVERSAL OXHERDER’S QUEST

By

Benjamin J. Wielechowski

This collection of nonfiction essays chronicles the narrator’s personal quest to abandon ego, beginning with early childhood, and ending at age 25, when he completed the manuscript. The collection is framed around the Ten Oxherding Songs, a thirteenth century Zen Buddhist parable of the search for enlightenment. Each essay corresponds to one of the ten stages of the oxherding parable as follows: 1. Searching for the Ox; 2. Seeing the Footprints; 3. Seeing the Ox; 4. Catching the Ox; 5. Herding the Ox; 6. Riding the Ox and Returning Home; 7. The Ox Transcended; 8. The Ox and Man, Both Transcended; 9. Return to Fundamentals, Back to Source; and 10. Returning to the City.

The narrator’s childhood and adolescent experiences—experiences filled with insecurities, fears, heartbreak, and expectations—lead him on a quest to abandon ego through various methods: he moves into the woods and lives out of a tent during his last semester of college; he hikes through the Appalachian Mountains for five months; he experiments with psychotropic plants; and he practices meditation and visits a Soto Zen Buddhist monastery. At its most basic level, this collection describes a quest to abandon a universal burden—that of ego.

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2009

## DEDICATION

To Mom, Dad, Dan, and Matt—

For all the guidance you've provided throughout my entire journey, and for your willingness to accompany me during the times I needed to guide myself.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.



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*“A thing is realized by means of perception,  
and not otherwise. Existence itself is illusory;  
we inhabit a dream in the mind of God.”*

—N. Scott Momaday, “Dreaming in Place”

## INTRODUCTION

*"It's you who are the Buddha, but you just won't see—  
Why go riding on an ox to search for an ox?"*

—Wuxue Zuyuan (1226-1286)

The following collection of essays follows the thirteenth century Zen Buddhist parable entitled the Ten Oxherding Songs, a series of poems and corresponding illustrations, which describe an allegorical quest of a young herdboyc in search of his missing ox. The quest, divided into ten stages, represents the search for enlightenment. The journey echoes Siddhartha's life, who abandoned his chosen place at the throne to search for an end to human suffering. He reached enlightenment through meditation, thus becoming one with his Buddha nature. In doing so, he discovered the answer to his quest: human suffering stems from ego. The ego keeps us from realizing the true nature of the universe, and as a result, we become trapped within the endless cycle of samsāra—life, death, and rebirth. When we transcend this ego and therefore our worldly attachment, we become one with our Buddha nature, the Buddha nature of all living things.

These essays chronicle a personal quest, similar to that of the oxherder—a quest to abandon ego, to lose that most pressing attachment in order to find one's place in the universe. Now, the oxherder parable represents a spiritual becoming, while my journey began as more of a psychological and intellectual quest. I've come to realize that there is no distinction.

The title of each essay corresponds to a stage in the oxherding parable as follows:

1. Searching for the Ox; 2. Seeing the Footprints; 3. Seeing the Ox; 4. Catching the Ox; 5.

Herding the Ox; 6. Riding the Ox and Returning Home; 7. The Ox Transcended; 8. The Ox and Man, Both Transcended; 9. Return to Fundamentals, Back to Source; and 10. Returning to the City. I've adapted the original ten oxherding poems to better reflect my personal journey, while attempting to maintain the essence of each original. Similarly, I've adapted the original sketches.

It is important to mention that my quest does not concern religion. Although the content of these essays often involves Zen Buddhism, I am not Buddhist and I am Buddhist. And even though I was brought up in a Roman Catholic household, and I attended church and catechism throughout my childhood, I am not Catholic and I am Catholic. I am nothing and I am everything. Breaking down the dualistic mode of thinking is imperative to understanding this journey.

The content of these essays revolves around several important philosophical concepts which I've defined according to my perception and to how I use them in the following essays:

- \*The Infinite: that which lies beyond our immediate reality.
- \*Reality: sensory perception of our human experience.
- \*Ego: a fashion of the mind that perceives reality in relation to self.
- \*Perception: how our ego interprets our reality.
- \*Existence: The Infinite + Reality + Ego + Perception.

In addition, the concept of dualism has caused me significant distress during the composition of these essays. I am still dealing with this issue. In philosophy, dualism of the mind refers to the mental and the physical, mind and matter, as dramatically different

entities. I had perceived this to mean that we exist in two ways: through our sensory perception—sight, sound, touch, and taste all constitute our existence; and through our perception of the world around us, which is where our mental chatter or rather, our ego manifests from. However, this perception of duality assumes two distinctions of the self, whereas in eastern thought, duality of mind refers to perceiving the “self” as separate from the rest of the world. Enlightenment involves transcending this dualistic mode of thinking.

At this point, I am still exploring and trying to understand the many layers of perception . . .

1.

Searching for the Ox



*"He is massive, and he is afoot,  
and something inside drives one to search for him, endlessly.*

*But even out across the open plains,  
There is nothing—*

*nothing more than the wind,  
than the grass  
than the mountain,  
than the flower."*

Memories are slippery fish. Over time, those most vivid tend to slip through our hands. The scaly bodies writhe free and we are left grabbing the empty air, staring at the widening ring ripple across the surface of the water. After that, those memories become the water, fluid and transient, taking on new and different shapes with each retelling.

Now, I remember childhood, sure. But not specific years and ages. Rather like a parachute, my childhood billows out in one enormous mosaic of moments and experiences. The individual experiences have been lost in time. For example, I cannot recall whether I was four years old or eight when I used to dread lying down in bed each night. Nor do I remember what age I was when I suffered anxiety attacks on the way to

church. What I can recall is the state of mind I felt during those experiences. Moments of such enormity, I can still reach back and fall into my head, enter that thought process, and see through those same eyes again.

Growing up, I shared a room with my little brother until my big brother moved away to college. Our room was small and so my parents invested in bunk beds to allow room for our Lego villages, weekly Ninja Turtle battles, and an assortment of bean bag chairs. I slept on the bottom bunk, Matt always up on top bunk. I still remember our arrangement, because I used to lie awake and stare at the black steel rungs supporting my little brother above. I remember how the moonlight entered through the blinds and reflected off the black metal. I still remember this image, black steel rungs looming above me, just as vividly as those nights so many years ago. I remember the image, because I dreaded it. However, I did not return to those memories for many years. There was something about them that I was not willing to confront.

Children often have experiences that defy science. They have been rumored to see auras, spirits, mythic beings, and invisible places. To a logical, rational adult mind, these experiences are no more than fiction or folktales—the fruit of ripe imaginations. Granted, children are blessed with incredible imaginations, creative beyond most fairy tales, and perhaps some of the stories should be received cautiously. But then again, the brain of a child operates much differently than the adult brain. Physiologically, the number of active electrical impulses in a child's brain far surpasses the number active in an adult's. Whether these electrical impulses enhance the capacity for imagination remains to be seen. One theory suggests that children have such active imaginations due

to an uninhibited regard for reality. No one has yet explained to them what is appropriate to believe in, or what constitutes an “acceptable” reality. Therefore, they operate outside of any established perception of reality.

A woman my mother worked with lost her baby due to complications several weeks after giving birth. For a full year afterward, her two other children, Cassie, a girl of four, and Jonathon, a boy of six, would talk to their deceased sibling. They’d reassure their mother that “Jared is okay” and “He’s in the living room playing with us.” One afternoon, the mother entered the living room to find a remote control car moving by itself. Cassie was sitting in the room, but she was not holding the control. The mother questioned, and Cassie explained that Jared was moving the car. She showed her mother, and commanded the car to stop and go. The car obeyed. The mother questioned her further: “Is Jared in the room now? What is he doing?” She did not doubt her daughter; rather, she sought validation for herself that Jared was actually present.

Similarly, there are numerous accounts of children tapping into their past lives. For example, in *The Universe in a Single Atom*, the Dalai Lama recounts the story of a young girl from Campor, Indonesia, who claimed to have a second set of parents during a past life. She knew who they were and exactly where to find them. Upon meeting her two parents from her supposed past life, the young girl described specific details about their deceased child’s life, which only close family members could have known. Although purely anecdotal, these stories attest to the unusual capabilities of children.

At some point that ability to perceive in such a way fades. With the woman my mother worked with, her children lost communication with Jared after the first couple years. Scientists seeking to answer these questions believe that the hardware in our



brains becomes relatively unchangeable after adolescence. Some neuro-scientists explain how during certain periods in life, certain ages, our brains have growth spurts when our neuron connectors grow in abundance. Our variety of experiences during these periods, whether positive or negative, helps to establish those connections. But soon after the growth spurts, the brain releases chemicals that act as tidal waves and wipe out any unused connections. Perhaps these tidal waves wipe out the unused connections that lend to metaphysical capabilities in children, particularly the ability to perceive alternate realities.

I was not aware of any special powers or supernatural capabilities as a child, but I remember one strange metaphysical experience lying in bed beneath my brother, staring at those black rungs above me. Those rungs were the only way to escape from the place my active mind would take me.

Having been raised Catholic, much of my life revolved around God and Jesus and church. Before bed, I'd close my eyes and pray to God for safety and good health. Perhaps praying to the divine—already a concept beyond what the human mind can logically grasp—opened my mind to the infinite scope of the universe. When I opened my eyes after prayer and my eyes adjusted to the deepening darkness of the room, my mind fell into a void. I entered an eerie static vortex, and the deeper I fell, the more that was stripped away. I began to comprehend the infinite. All the layers of my physical reality began to peel off in distinct fragments: my body, the room, my house, my parents, my family, society, buildings, neighborhoods, cities, the trees, the grass, the mountains, and then, only my floating mind in a great, terrifying abyss. Once I fell into the void, I

couldn't escape. So I stared at the black steel rungs finding it difficult to breathe. When the fear became too great, I ran to my parents' room and stood beside their bed, without saying a word, until my mother awoke.

"What's the matter, Honey?" she asked.

"Can I sleep in here?" I replied, unable to articulate the intensity of fear I had experienced. I could not even say *I'm scared*. Somehow she knew.

"Did you have a nightmare?"

"Can I just sleep in here?" She always agreed and set a blanket and pillow on the floor beside the bed.

I talk about the experience as if I traveled to the infinite, only because the void was vast and endless. But I still don't know exactly *where* I traveled to during those nights, or how I got there. And except during that span in my life of no specific age or duration, I have not been able to return to that place of mind. I remember the steps I took to get there as a child, the fear and angst I felt as I fell deeper and deeper away from the physical world, but those same steps do not take me to the same place anymore. I was capable of something as a child that I lost with age. My mind perceived the universe more intimately and quite possibly more accurately. I broke through the bindings of the sensory and floated around in the *nothingness*, or the *everythingness*, rather than remain in the world that I had been told exists, and the world I felt I had some control over. I still don't know if the experience was all in my mind, or if I unlocked some secret door to the greater universe. Or if there is even a difference.

I have always been unusually aware of my mind and thoughts. At times, my thoughts seemed to take over, often against my will, and I became trapped within one fantasy or another. From what I remember, these experiences seemed most acute when I was a little boy.

I remember riding to church in my family's maroon Aerostar minivan. Casey Kassem's *top whatever* droned softly on the radio. In the two front seats, my mom and dad discussed the amount of money to donate to the church that week, while my mom applied lipstick using the visor mirror. My two brothers and I, still bleary-eyed and yawning, sat quietly looking out the window during the mile-long ride to St. John Neumann. During those tired, quiet mornings, I had time to think, usually about God, religion, and church (sometimes though about donuts, WWF, and cartoons). So I challenged myself, not intentionally, but because my mind drifted and I lacked any control over it.

*Say you hate your parents. Say you hate God. Try not to. I bet you can't.*

"I don't, I won't," I internally fought back, addressing whoever or whatever it was putting those thoughts in my head. And from there, the internal battle only intensified.

There came a point when no matter how hard I tried, I could not fight the impulse, and those thoughts entered my mind. I never meant what I was saying, but that didn't stop the words from coming.

"I hate my parents. I hate God. No I don't! No I don't!" It tore me apart.

I remember crying. But I don't remember any reaction from my family. Perhaps it was just the internal anguish. I can't say now. But the anguish only lasted those few

minutes in the car, followed by the walk up to the church. When I entered the church I felt safe. I was distracted and those thoughts had no more room to terrorize.

At the time, I was confused and frustrated. I felt powerless and guilty. How could I let those things cross my mind? What was wrong with me? I absolutely did not hate my parents, and I did not hate God. But I couldn't avoid the voice in my head. I was ruled by it, slave to it.

This happened long before I knew about the different facets of the mind, long before I knew what mental chatter was, and long before I realized how ego affected my reality. I have since matured and grown with experience. Now I understand the human mind does in fact have different facets. I understand that one facet is ego, and that that ego almost always determines my reality and approach to the world. And I have finally begun to understand that ego, my perception of reality, is only one facet of my existence. What lay beyond that particular existence and reality, what lay beyond that dualistic mode of thinking, was what triggered my quest. I wanted to overcome my ego, to transcend the ox, and find what lay at the core of existence.

I remember a diagram of the human condition my friend David once drew. We sat drinking Two-Hearted ales at a hotel bar, discussing dreams, meditation, and psychedelic substances. At one point, he grabbed a napkin and scribbled an asterisk in the middle. "This is the core," he said. "Now think of it like this," and he drew a larger circle around the asterisk. "This is where most of us operate. Outside of that core. Now with hallucinogenics like LSD," he drew an arrow in, halfway to the asterisk, "we can get close to that core, but not completely." Then he drew an even larger circle surrounding the smaller circle and the asterisk. "A lot of people operate out here. Far away from the

core. This is like, ‘Oh, I need this new pair of jeans.’” He drew more arrows pointing outward. “And we can move out even farther from here.” Then he pointed the pen back at the asterisk and shook it vigorously. “The only way to reach this, I think, is through dreams, and maybe meditation.”

Why can’t I help but think about that diagram as I try to make sense of my childhood experiences—looking up at the black steel rungs as layer upon layer fell away?

2.

Seeing the Footprints



*“There are traces scattered everywhere,  
By the shore of the riverbed,  
Beneath the cherry blossom tree.*

*The ox treads softly,  
Like the breeze carries spring.*

*When will you lift your face  
from the grazing pasture?”*

I taught a basic college composition course while attending graduate school at Northern Michigan University. During a nonfiction unit, I incorporated the Hollywood film, *Stranger than Fiction*, in order to discuss the nature of fiction and nonfiction. I contacted the screenwriter, Zach Helm, who agreed to speak with my class via video chat. Zach was interested in characters within narratives: What is a ‘character’? Are the characters we create real? What happens to characters off the page between chapters or during a break in time?

“This is our immediate reality,” Zach had said. “We’re talking here in this classroom. After you leave this place, you may go off and talk about the experience.

You're creating a narrative. On one hand, you might go and tell your friends that I'm an arrogant asshole. Maybe you'll call me a fuckin' genius. I don't know. *You're* creating a character. I have no control over that."

What Zach said reminded me of the popular quote, "*what other people think about you is really none of your business.*" This concept was difficult to understand when I was younger. There was no such thing as the 'character' of me, outside of the actual me. Reputation was everything. I *was* what other people thought of me. Acceptance helped to build my self-confidence and self-worth. It validated my existence.

Reputation seemed to matter the most in high school. Friday night football games were the biggest social event of the week. We all looked forward to the games because it was either a time to establish or maintain our social status. It was about how many passing "hellos" you received, how many cute girls stopped to talk, and whether you watched the game up on the bleachers, or mingled below in the crowd of teenagers, a seemingly fluid mass that was actually divided into distinct cliques. There was the 'Dirt Clan,' a group of talented upper classman freestyle rapping all game; the potheads, quietly laughing to one another; groups of athletes standing together; and many others.

I was fortunate to have an older brother who attended the same high school. His friends liked me, which confirmed my worth and secured me a place in the popular group of my own age, who were an important group to be part of. They were cool. They partied. They dated the prettiest girls. They were mature and had had new and different experiences. But the connections between people were weak and simple, an almost gaseous state. Similar status seemed to be the basis of our friendship, rather than a genuine kinship. No one seemed to reveal much of themselves to one another, other than

in a social context. The conversation was superficial and hollow. We talked of MTV, laughed about and quoted *The Tom Green Show*, and recounted our weekend experiences with drugs and alcohol, along with any other trouble we managed to get into.

When I was alone, however, I thought about philosophy and literature. All of this dwelled inside though, roiling like a slow-boil stew. I did not feel comfortable bringing philosophy up in conversation, not even with my closest neighborhood friends who I had grown up with. Although we shared a genuine respect and appreciation for one another, we constantly spent our time *doing* things, one activity after another: basketball, trampoline, video games, ghost in the graveyard, or something else. We'd go to movies, spend the day at the lake, or simply goof around. We were too busy to talk about the more existential matters, because they were not crucial to building close friendships and enjoying adolescence.

My draw to philosophy, and, particularly, to existentialism continued to intensify, and since I had no one to talk with, I began to write. This allowed me to materialize thoughts, which was a necessary outlet, but my perception and perspective was still limited. Then I began working at the Main Street Auto Wash. We had a boss, but his presence was rare and he basically left his employees to run the business. From all different grades, different walks of life, and different experiences, we banded together and formed a community. I worked with alcoholics, heroin addicts, potheads, athletes, musicians, burnouts, and intellectuals. There was a mix of men and women. The majority of us were high school students, yet whatever reputation we had at school faded away. It was our little sanctuary to be ourselves—as much as any of us knew how. The auto wash was our fresh start.



At the car wash I learned that reputation did not matter—at least not in the way I had worked it up to be at school. There was a certain camaraderie and mutual respect during the work day. We all endured the same work experience, which bonded us more closely than did the desire to build a reputation. Somehow egos seemed to deflate more and more every new day of work, and the things I once considered to be so important, slowly shifted into the background. Instead, I spent four to eight hours a day brushing, spraying, or drying off cars. The job was meditative. I spent hours in the presence of my own thoughts, and all of a sudden, philosophy and existential thought became a large part of my day. I recorded deep thoughts and posed hard questions: *How can one not believe in God but be so involved with love? Can you expose yourself by hiding something?* I invented quotes and metaphors: *Relying on something is standing on the cliff of instinct. Every time you play in the sand, you don't have to build a sand castle; every time you exhale, you don't have to create a tornado.* I exercised and challenged my mind, and eventually became comfortable with my inner thoughts.

When the incessant train of cars let up for a brief period, I had Duncan to talk to. Duncan was an individual who thought about similar things in solitude: philosophy, literature, politics, and everything in between. We had grown up in the same neighborhood, living two houses down from one another, but we had never really hung out together because he was a year older and part of a different crowd. But we became fast friends at the car wash. We drove together; we worked together; we went to school together. I finally felt comfortable enough to talk about what I constantly thought about. No more MTV. No more Tom Green. We didn't even talk about sports. We talked about philosophy. We talked about the mind. Instead of the celebrity gossip, we talked

about the madness of society in relying on such distractions. We talked about literary geniuses like Dostoevsky and Ayn Rand and J.D. Salinger. He read more than me and had an opinion about everything. We spent our days at work suggesting new ideas, new books to read, and new ways of thinking. We offered lessons to one another about whatever crossed our minds—why selfishness and capitalism according to Ayn Rand and *Atlas Shrugged* actually makes a whole lot of sense; why communism, in and of itself, was not fundamentally corrupt or wrong, but actually an altruistic political approach—otherwise, Che Guevarra would not be regarded so highly in so many cultures.

One evening I remember discussing an article in the *National Inquirer* about a family who shaved an infant chimpanzee and brought him up as a normal boy. The publication of the article celebrated the enrollment of the animal into kindergarten. Our conversation eventually turned towards the ethics of raising a chimpanzee as a real boy. Would a constant human environment provide enough of an influence for a chimpanzee to succeed as a human? The idea was absurd, but we found it endlessly fascinating. I left work each day with my mind vibrating from all the new discussion, and the new angles Duncan offered of looking at certain topics. Of course, I valued the time I spent philosophizing alone, but having another person to bounce those ideas off of created something different, something fresh and enlightening.

I remember one Saturday afternoon during a summer rush, when Duncan and I were working slavishly for six hours in assembly line fashion as car after car pulled through the wash. We continually applied bug spray, brushed bumpers and windows, powerwashed wheel-wells and bottom panels, and then sent the cars through the automatic wash. Duncan worked the power wash; I manned the horse-hair brush. I had

brought a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and Funyuns for a snack that day, and I constantly thought about that snack while cars continued to pull through. At times, the line-up dwindled and I walked into the garage for just one single bite, when all of a sudden the bell rang as another car pulled up. I gritted my teeth, took a deep breath and returned to my station. I absolutely hated those cars. I blamed them. They kept me from satisfying my hunger, my desires. After hours of the torture, I realized something needed to change. I decided to analyze the situation: my well-being was fully dependent on the cars, over which I had absolutely no control. The customers were not at fault, because washing cars was my job. I was at fault. My mind created desire. If I wanted my well-being to change, I would have to discipline my mind. During a short break when the cars had slowed, I pulled Duncan aside.

“Dude. I found the trick to this job. I have been thinking about it all day. Whenever I feel miserable, it’s because of desire. Like my sandwich. I get pissed because I desire that sandwich. If I don’t think about that, I have no problem washing car after car after car.”

He looked back at me and asked, “Have you read any Zen?”

“No,” I said. I had heard Duncan mention the term before, but all I knew was that it connected to Buddhism.

“Well, that sounds a lot like it,” he replied with a smile. I left it at that, unsure if I wanted to search any deeper for fear of conflicts with my Catholic upbringing.

For the rest of the day, I focused on the cars and on each and every window I had to brush. My reality consisted of cars. My mind drifted from time to time, to my

sandwich and other periphery things, but all I had to do was come back to what I was doing in that very moment.

I haven't always been capable of disciplining my mind. In fact, that day at the car wash was the first day I can remember being consciously aware of the workings of my mind. Growing up, I never understood my mind, and the ego manifested in strange and powerful ways. I remember sitting down for snack time during fourth, maybe fifth grade, with my elbows raised to my shoulders. I attempted to sit cross-legged without using my arms, but if I lost my balance, if even one finger touched the carpet, I ran to the sink to wash my hands. If I touched anything during the day that I didn't intentionally mean to, I had to wash my hands. I *absolutely* had to. I washed my hands probably one hundred times a day. At the end of each day, my hands were dry, my knuckles chalky white, cracked, and bleeding.

I suffered from obsessive compulsive disorder, or OCD, an anxiety disorder characterized by repetitive behaviors and intrusive recurring thoughts. My OCD was never diagnosed, but I didn't need a doctor to tell me something I already knew. I compulsively washed my hands, because I was deathly afraid of germs. The advent of my OCD seemed to coincide with the advent of AIDS in North America, as well as the new addition of a box turtle into my family. My parents said, "Salmonella," and I was never quite the same.

My biggest problem at the time was a matter of perception. I could not tell what was real and what was illusory. Were my thoughts real, the incessant, pounding chatter telling me to wash my hands? Or, was the danger of death and disease real, all the more

pressing if I did not wash my hands? Or was it all in my mind and none of it real? Or did that mean all of it was real? Because I could not control what was happening in my mind, and I could not rationalize my behavior, I controlled the fear by washing my hands. I was “*okay*” if I washed my hands. At the time I had successfully tricked my mind into accepting that the germs were the real problem. They were not, of course. The problem was mental. I was still struggling to comprehend and ultimately discipline the different facets of the mind.

Within the year, I overcame my OCD. I can’t claim to know exactly how, or what caused the change, but I remember my mother buying me a ‘worry stone,’ a small piece of polished glass with a shallow indentation the size of a thumb print to rub away worries. This simple stone provided an outlet in two ways. First, I constantly hid my hand away in my pocket in order to rub the stone. This limited my chances of touching something I would regret and consequently seek a faucet. Second, I could use the worry stone as a distraction when I felt that anxiety creep into my mind. If I focused intently enough on the stone, I could silence the thoughts in my mind. I didn’t consciously understand why a little stone was enough to escape the powerful biddings of my mind, but I imagine on some visceral level, I began to perceive of the mind differently. Maybe I did not have a term for ego, or know exactly what ego was, but I was aware of it—I could see the footprints. And I knew I’d have to confront that ego at some point.

3.

Seeing the Ox



*"On a clear day, the ox cannot hide,  
Not among the shimmering reeds  
or beside the flowing stream.*

*Not behind the mountains,  
when the sun rises above the peaks—  
but can the bush warbler perch  
upon those majestic horns?"*

By the time most of us can consciously think for ourselves, we've already been conditioned, spoon fed ideals and beliefs and hopes and dreams, so much so that it becomes difficult to distinguish what we want in life, what we need in life, and what we think we want or need in life. I grew up thinking I knew. Life was about falling in love, and this fulfilled my purpose and all of my wants and needs—I believed that the notion of love satisfied everything.

In January 2004 I boarded a plane with my girlfriend, Rachel, to Madrid, Spain. Both of us had decided to study abroad for a semester. I would be studying in the capital, she in Caceres, a small town farther south. When we arrived in Spain, I was awkward. Spain was my first *real* international experience and the new culture, the new land, and

especially the new language, caused me to freeze up. Nervous and quiet, I couldn't react to the changes. And it seemed the quieter I became, the more distant Rachel became. There were four of us wandering around Madrid that first day, but I only remember Rachel and a mounting nausea as we floated like ghosts through the capital city, visiting plazas and pubs.

Rachel and I had shared our first kiss at a Christmas party one year prior to our trip to Spain. I had just turned nineteen years old. She was tall and blond and beautiful, and she was intellectual and elegant. The attraction between us was mutual, and that night happened to be the first time I opened myself to the possibility of a serious relationship. I had been avoiding romantic relationships for years, because the idea made me uncomfortable. The last time I had a girlfriend had been in eighth grade. I was only thirteen, and the motivation was all wrong back then. I wanted to fit in with everyone around me who was dating, and I wanted to experience what everyone was talking about. I wanted to feel what I'd seen in the movies and in the booths on Friday nights at the bowling alley, couples nestling close to one another, rubbing noses and kissing, as if they couldn't possibly help themselves. But in eighth grade, I only felt uncomfortable and awkward at the *Superbowl* bowling alley, squeezed into a booth with my girlfriend, hoping she wouldn't try to kiss me in front of everyone.

I used to blame my awkwardness and hesitancy with romance on the movies and fairy tales I had been brought up with. Every fairy tale, every Disney movie, and every teen romance film portrayed two star-crossed lovers, who after facing a series of obstacles, ended up together happily ever after. I built my expectations from those stories and my concept of love developed into an ideal. I believed wholeheartedly that love was

perfect and beautiful and warm and enduring and completely satisfying. I believed that true love could take the place of everything in my life. Love had truly become fantasy.

After the Christmas party, Rachel and I started dating informally, and our relationship seemed to follow the traditional plotline of a love story. At first we were nervous, self-conscious, both of us trying to please the other so completely we forgot about ourselves. I remember sitting in her car during a wintry Sunday afternoon. She had driven seven hours from Michigan State University to visit me at Northern Michigan University in Marquette. We spent the weekend getting drunk and going to parties. We had only just begun dating and we never seemed to grow any closer. Instead, we idled in a haze of booze. Sunday rolled around and I felt uncomfortable, like I never showed her the way I truly felt. I cared so deeply for her and I wanted her to know it. At the same time, I secretly hoped for her to reciprocate the feelings. She patiently reassured me, telling me I was doing everything right. So we kissed and I ran into the dorm as she drove away. The feeling she gave me was better than anything the movies had ever given me. Even when I felt inadequate and embarrassed, she built my confidence back up. She was confirmation that I was real and that what I felt was real. We were in love, and the affection between us seemed boundless.

We formally became boyfriend and girlfriend during the summer of 2003. I invited her and a bunch of high school friends to my family's summer cottage for a weekend. I have always considered the cottage a magical place, and Rachel only enhanced the magic. We stole glances all day, waiting for the moment when we could unabashedly embrace one another. A few weeks later, Rachel decided to meet me at Schoolcraft College for lunch at 2:30 in the morning, where I worked as a janitor during



summer break. She snuck away from her house, and I snuck away from the job. She arrived with a candle and no matches, a story about the grocery store hassling her for trying to buy sparkling grape juice past a certain time, and a quaint meal for two: subs, pickles, grapes, Oreos, circus peanuts, crackers and peanut butter, salt and pepper in glass shakers, water glasses, and vinegar dressing, all wrapped in wax paper, packed in a picnic basket. I remember she said she wasn't hungry, and so she watched me with a smile as I ate a lunch for two. I cannot remember any of the conversation we shared, but for some reason words were not important that night. Nor was the fact that we were breaking rules. The only thing that mattered was sharing that moment together.

At the end of the summer I had to return to college, located seven hours away. My junior year was about to begin. We spent the afternoon together, ate lunch at Panera Bread Company, and walked through the park downtown. Neither one of us had much to say because we had only one thing on our minds: separation. In those few summer months, I had become closer to her than anyone else in my life. For me, the entire summer seemed to lead up to that departure. I gave her a picture of a mountain, telling her a mountain always appears less monstrous the farther an observer moves away from it. It was supposed to symbolize the two of us. She handed me a heartbreaking letter of how much I meant to her. We stuttered over awkward goodbyes, trying to hold back tears, and then we parted. The moment I stepped into my vehicle, a rush of emotion came over me. I felt sick. It hurt, bad. But it never felt so good to hurt so badly.

As the relationship progressed into the fall semester of 2003, she became my life. I talked to her every night. I checked my email continually, waiting for her next message. During my moments alone, I found comfort in the little conversations we

shared the night before, or in what she had written in the last email. I spent hours thinking about what I'd write to her, trying to find just the right words for what I wanted to say. My world revolved around her. I remember walking through the snow one evening during final exams when I stopped to make two snow angels, one beside the other. I was so happy, so in love. But I really only made the snow angels for her, so I could tell her about them and prove my love.

In that short time, a mere few months, I had found it: that profound love I burned for, the love that movies are made about. I was deeply and madly in love. And then she dumped me in Madrid, less than a month later. I don't know why she chose Madrid. Maybe she thought we'd be so busy in our new experiences that we wouldn't have time to dwell on the pain of the "break-up." And maybe that worked for her. Not for me, at least not at first. The initial break-up was brutal and took me a full month to recover from. I went through withdrawal. I had difficulty eating, sleeping, and accomplishing day to day activities. But the worst part wasn't the withdrawal—it was that I had lost my identity. For the past year I had associated who I was with Rachel. Now she was gone, and I didn't know who I was. I flipped through my mental repertoire of romance stories searching for an explanation, hoping I would discover a hidden chapter, an epilogue that eventually brought the two lovers back together. I came up empty.

At the end of my first month in Spain, I realized Rachel was right—Spain was the perfect distraction. My studies-abroad group became the focus. We bonded quickly and spent night after night in English speaking Irish pubs and in quaint Spanish *cervecerías* drinking half beers in long, dark, narrow rooms. We danced in three-story *discotecas*.

We visited museums. We traveled on the weekends. I fully immersed myself in the Spanish culture and somehow Rachel faded into the background.

I never fully understood her reasons for ending the relationship. In Spain, she told me she did not like how loving me made her feel. She felt jealous and weak, not herself. I argued with her, insisting on how good love felt, and how worthwhile it was. I tried to make her feel guilty. I wanted her to feel like she was making a huge mistake. I needed her to hurt, because maybe the hurt would make her think clearly. That was my thinking. But I wanted her to see the situation my way. The truth is that she *was* thinking clearly. I simply couldn't accept that. I was blind, blind by love, blind by my dependency on Rachel.

In *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rainer Maria Rilke writes:

Loving does not first mean merging, surrendering, and uniting with another person (for what would a union be of two people who are unclarified, unfinished, and still incoherent—?). [Young people] (who by their very nature are impatient) fling themselves at each other when love takes hold of them, they scatter themselves, just as they are, in all their messiness, disorder, bewilderment . . . : And what can happen then? What can life do with this heap of half-broken things that they call their communion and that they would like to call their happiness, if that were possible, and their future?

I showed Rachel this quote and told her how Rilke must not have experienced what we had. I was naïve, making hasty conclusions on love, thinking I had it figured out. The truth was I didn't understand—I didn't understand Rilke, and I definitely didn't understand love.

Understanding comes with age and experience. I've realized that. I used to define romantic love according to the movies because they were my only frequent exposure to romance (my parents didn't count because they were my parents and I was too young to appreciate their incredible romantic relationship). Although those stories

formed my ideal of what romance felt like and looked like, I realized that the fundamental problem lay in how I individually perceived of that romantic love. The feeling of stomach flutters, the longing, becoming whole, finding your other half, and living happily ever after—all that explained love, and I sought those elements. However, that type of love requires dependency. The wonderful feeling that accompanies that “love” manifests from a growing self-worth. With Rachel, I found self-worth because she found me worthy of her love. My insecure and adolescent ego swelled with importance—a very unstable kind—because I relied on it from an external source. The feeling became an addiction. The relationship had become a type of parasitism.

After studying three months in Madrid, I traveled through Europe by train with another girl from the program. Alexandra (‘Xan’ for short) was an attractive, black, twenty-five year old. She was an amateur ballroom-dancer back in Indiana, but moved to Spain in search of new experiences. I asked her to join me for the month, and she quickly agreed. Regardless of the mutual attraction between us, we had an unspoken agreement to strictly remain travel companions without risking romantic involvement. She knew about my situation with Rachel, and I was aware of her relationship with a guy back in Indiana.

Our first stop was Barcelona. She arrived several hours later than me as a monsoon poured down on the gothic city. Spring had begun. We reserved tickets on the night train departing the following evening and so had one day to experience all of Barcelona. Early the next morning, we hopped on a double-decker tour bus, stopped by Park Guell, an enormous park showcasing the artwork and architecture of artist, Antoni

Gaudi. We stopped by the site of the '92 Summer Olympic Games, and finally, we stopped at a worldwide traveling Dali exhibit. Dali's artwork, collected from museums around the world and condensed into one exhibit, happened to be in Barcelona at the time. We spent hours strolling through the exhibit. At one point, Xan and I paused in front of one of Dali's paintings.

“What do you think that desert symbolizes, and those things above?” Xan asked, and then offered her interpretation. I stared at the painting trying to come up with something. I had nothing to offer. I looked and saw a painting, but did not even consider what the image could mean. Instead I thought back to a conversation I had had with Rachel about paintings. I continued to wander through the exhibit, and while I was standing in a dark foyer of the museum, a realization came over me just after Xan said something to me, something as simple as, “What are you thinking about?” I was not thinking about Dali, or the paintings, or even the incredible trip I was on. I was thinking about Rachel. Rachel had absorbed so much of my life and my thoughts, that not until that moment, did I realize to what consequence. I had stopped seeking all that fascinated me. I had stopped growing as a human being. I had given up everything for her—my hopes, dreams, and goals—all became her. I remember telling her that whatever she wanted to do with her life, I would follow. As long as I was with her, I didn't care what else this human experience was about, or what else was going on in the world.

I had lost myself. I had become nothing. For the past year, my entire significance as a human being depended on the eyes and heart of this one girl. What I had worked up to be the pinnacle of human experience, my overall purpose in life, had crumbled and buried me beneath. The heartbreak left me stranded until art and travel and people

buoyed me and I could feel my legs again. In was then I realized life did not exist within the confines of one other human being. In searching for myself through someone else, I only discovered a greater distance from that personal truth of *who* and *what* I was.

After Rachel, I wanted to experience everything I possibly could. I didn't want to have a purpose anymore. I just wanted pure experience. However, traveling through Europe—meeting so many different people from so many different places, and experiencing fresh, unfamiliar things—all led towards discovering what this life is all about, which is just as much a purpose as any other. So maybe having a purpose is okay—regardless of what that purpose is—as long as we continue to grow, whether mentally, physically, spiritually, or otherwise. But not like capitalism and western culture. Not a metastasizing growth. Rather, we need to grow within as an individual and strengthen and reinforce that core, to increase in density, rather than in mass or volume.

With Rachel, I didn't want to grow. I didn't want anything to change. I could have started a family and a life with her, which I thought would have made me happy forever, without ever needing to experience anything new. Rachel showed me how important growth is. Regardless if she intended to or not, she also taught me sacrifice, that no matter how much love you feel for something or someone, sometimes you have to let it go in favor of personal growth. She was absolutely right. And so I decided to direct my efforts inward, to discover myself within myself. I had caught sight of the ox.

4.

Catching the Ox



*"Upon first recognition, I confront the ox.*

*I the strength of one, he the strength of many,  
Heeds not the rope;  
He bucks and charges  
through shaded groves and  
up to high plateaus—*

*I follow, searching for his shadow  
in the clouded mist."*

In 1970, writer Jerome David (J.D.) Salinger left the writing world. A recluse since 1953, he has written and published short stories and novellas such as *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters* (1955), *Seymour: an Introduction* (1959), and *Hapworth 16, 1924* (1965). Then suddenly, at the height of his career, he stopped publishing, leaving fans and critics with nothing but speculation.

When I was younger, I knew Salinger because of his "reclusive celebrity" and because of his novel, *The Catcher and the Rye*, which was constantly referenced in English classes through my secondary education. He intrigued me, much as he has the

greater public, but not enough for me to pick up any of his books. I always considered him to be weird and detached. However, all of that changed when a friend urged me to read *Franny* and *Zooey*.

During a week-long vacation in Outer Banks, North Carolina, in the summer of 1998, I spent every afternoon on the porch of our rented beach house, sprawled out on a hammock, reading Salinger's book for hours. Now, books have strange and wonderful effects on people. They can inspire us, guide us, and emotionally move us. They can reveal things about ourselves and about the world. For me, *Franny* and *Zooey* provided my first experience with literature. Even though I grew up reading books, and I developed somewhat of an obsession for reading during my elementary school years, *Franny* and *Zooey* affected me differently. Perhaps I was maturing. Prior to Salinger, books served as entertainment. Through middle school and into the beginning of high school, I had read several classics—*To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Death Be Not Proud*, *Black Like Me*, and *The Giver*—and I loved them all. Those books provided an outlet for the imagination, an outlet into unfamiliar worlds and perspectives. I became enraptured with these books, exploring beautiful and sometimes tragic other worlds and realities. But I didn't appreciate these books as literature, not in the way I should have, not relishing the opportunity to peer deeper inside my own being and the world around me. At least, not until that final moment in *Zooey*, when the main character Zooey calls his sister to explain what their older brother Seymour meant when he would say to always perform for the "Fat Lady." Staring out at the ocean from my swaying perch, my skin gritty and dry from the salty breeze, I listened to Zooey tell Franny, "There isn't anyone *anywhere* that isn't Seymour's Fat Lady. Don't you know that? Don't you know



that goddam secret yet? And don't you know – *listen* to me, now – *don't you know who that Fat Lady really is?* . . . Ah, buddy. Ah, buddy. It's Christ Himself. Christ Himself, buddy." Tears swelled in my eyes and a profound silence surrounded me. In that silence I *felt* those words. Not in an intellectual way. I didn't need to understand what he was saying. Rather, I felt the words with something much deeper. Like the pause after a life-threatening experience, or the precise moment we encounter a sunrise, a storm, or a wild animal, it almost felt like salvation.

Salinger grounded me. But not in the way my parents and brothers had when I was ten, delicately explaining Santa Claus to me. Those truths, about legends and great mythic characters, somehow steal the magic away from our reality, rather than ground us in it. Salinger, on the other hand, grounded me in the true beauty of our human experience, the capacity of humanity, and the power of words and subtlety. Through this he became not only an author I admired, but a friend and mentor, and most importantly, the gateway into Zen philosophy.

In Salinger's short story "Teddy," published in the *New Yorker* in 1953, the opening scene describes a young boy on a cruise with his family, staring out the porthole of their cabin. The ten year old boy, Teddy, notices scattered orange peels floating in the ocean below and contemplates reality: "Some of them are starting to sink now. In a few minutes, the only place they'll still be floating will be in my mind. That's quite interesting, because if you look at it a certain way, that's where they started floating in the first place." Here, Salinger emphasizes the importance of perception, and of looking *into* things, rather than using logic and intellect to explain them. When I first read this story, it confused me in a curious sort of way. I did not fully understand the concepts

Teddy spoke of, but the subject matter fascinated me. I did not immediately seek further understanding, but somehow I knew that what Salinger had written was important and beautiful. As the story progresses, the theme of perception becomes more explicit as Teddy and an older man argue about what an “arm” is. He quickly refers to the apple that Adam ate in the Garden of Eden:

You know what was in that apple? Logic. Logic and intellectual stuff. That was all that was in it. So—this is my point—what you have to do is vomit it up if you want to see things as they really are. I mean if you vomit it up, then you won’t have any more trouble with blocks of wood and stuff. You won’t see everything stopping *off* all the time. And you’ll know what your arm really is, if you’re interested. Do you know what I mean?

Teddy discusses our general regard for the physical world, what we consider to be reality. He talks about transcending the finite dimensions of our reality, a Zen concept. D.T. Suzuki, a famous author and Zen Buddhist scholar, largely responsible for bringing Eastern philosophy to the west, once said, “If anything, [Zen] is the antipode of logic, by which I mean the dualistic mode of thinking.” The typical method of naming and classifying *things* is logical, as the older man argues. It helps us organize our experience and make sense of the world. However, we do so for ourselves—naming things is a human construct. As Teddy argues, our naming system is arbitrary because things exist regardless of what we call them. Therefore, naming has no effect on the existence of things, only in how we humans perceive them. Teddy encourages the older man to think beyond his narrow perception, beyond a dualistic mode of thinking—the idea that everything is either *this* way, or *that* way. Years after reading “Teddy” for the first time and years after taking my own journey with Zen philosophy, I discovered that Salinger had put into words much of what I had been contemplating and struggling with on my own.

Salinger further helped pinpoint my particular struggle in his novella *Franny*, published in the *New Yorker* in 1955. I did not connect Zen Buddhism to the many concepts Salinger discusses when I first read the story in 1998. Only now, a decade later, do I understand the profound connection he draws between religion, Eastern philosophy, and the daily lives of a young couple living in bourgeoisie America of the 1950s. Franny Glass, the protagonist of the story, struggles with ego:

I'm just sick of ego, ego, ego. My own and everybody else's. I'm sick of everybody that wants to *get* somewhere, do something distinguished and all, be somebody interesting. [. . .] I'm so horribly conditioned to accept everybody else's values, and just because I like applause and people to rave about me, doesn't make it right. I'm ashamed of it. I'm sick of it. I'm sick of not having the courage to be an absolute nobody.

This is no light matter Franny speaks of. Struggling with ego is deeply personal and spiritual, but it also has extensive social and societal relevance. Reading *Franny* and *Zooey*, both stories about idealistic individuals trying to live and operate in a society at odds with their values, helped me articulate my own struggle with ego.

Once I was able to articulate my personal struggle with ego, I knew that a confrontation with ego was inevitable. Thus, I embarked on a journey and became Salinger's student by immersing myself into his fiction about the Glass family. His stories and characters helped me identify my overbearing ego, which I believed to be the cause of most of my suffering. I connected with one character in particular: Seymour, the eldest brother. Through Salinger's beautiful and moving narratives about Seymour and the rest of Glass family living in post-World War II New York, everything seemed so much clearer. Ultimately, Salinger's portrayal of Seymour and Seymour's awareness of Zen persuaded me to delve deeper into Zen Buddhism.

Near the end of *Seymour: An Introduction*, Buddy Glass describes Seymour's athleticism in a variety of sports. He specifically celebrates Seymour's innate talent and outlandish techniques while playing stoopball and curb marbles. He recounts a story where Seymour decides to coach Buddy on *not* aiming, which harkens back to the Zen saying, "If you are trying to aim for it, you are turning away from it":

The method of marble-shooting that Seymour, by sheer intuition, was recommending to me can be related, I'd say, legitimately and un-Easternly, to the fine art of snapping a cigarette end into a small wastebasket from across the room. An art, I believe, of which most male smokers are true masters only when either they don't care a hoot whether or not the butt goes into the basket or the room has been cleared of eyewitnesses, including, quite so to speak, the cigarette snapper himself.

Directly following this anecdote and entirely related, Buddy recounts yet another childhood memory. When Buddy was nine, he considered himself the "Fastest Boy Runner in the World." In sneakers that only the "Fastest Boy Runner in the World" would wear, Buddy speeds off to the grocery store on an errand for his mother. He is so absorbed in his speed and in his glorious fantasy of tearing past Olympic runners and waving to them, that he does not hear a second pair of footsteps approach until a hand reaches out to grab him:

My pursuer was, of course, Seymour, and he was looking pretty damned scared himself. "What's the *matter*? What *happened*?" he asked me frantically. He was still holding on to my sweater. I yanked myself loose from his hand and informed him [. . .] that *nothing* had happened, *nothing* was the matter, that I was just *running*, for cryin' out loud. His relief was prodigious. "Boy, did you scare me!" he said. "Wow, were you moving! I could hardly catch *up* with you!"

Buddy and Seymour represent the dichotomy between an egotistical and an egoless state of existence. Buddy struggles with his ego consciously. He tries to establish and maintain a self-image as the Fastest Boy Runner, or a great marble shooter. He is caught up in the finite dimensions of his self-perception. Seymour, on the other hand, represents

the transcendence of ego. He unconsciously operates above and beyond ego. He succeeds at curb marbles because he doesn't care how shooting curb marbles reflects his being. He runs faster than Buddy out of worry, not to show off and fuel his ego.

Seymour's character, his enlightened state and egoless existence, in connection to the prevalence of Zen in his work, has led me to the conclusion that finally, and fittingly, J.D. Salinger and his alter ego Buddy Glass reached what he always strived to attain: a Seymour-ness, a likeness to Buddha and Jesus, one detached from that which binds us to this materialistic world more than anything else—our ego. Now, I only speculate here, but perhaps rather than struggle with the symptoms of ego, Salinger identified the disease, and the disease was a matter of perception, an individual and internal affair. He transcended his ego and reached some other level of being. Perhaps his disappearance was simply an external manifestation of what he had discovered within.

The last short story Salinger published was titled "Hapworth 16, 1924," (*New Yorker*, 1965), and is narrated by a seven-year-old Seymour Glass. Seymour writes to his family during a summer camp he and Buddy are attending:

As you must know in your hearts and bowels, we miss you all like sheer hell. Unfortunately, I am far from above hoping the case is vice versa. This is a matter of quite a little humorous despair to me, though not so humorous. It is entirely disgusting to be forever achieving little actions of the heart or body and then taking recourse to reaction. I am utterly convinced that if A's hat blows off while he is sauntering down the street, it is the charming duty of B to pick it up and hand it to A without examining A's face or combing it for gratitude! My God, let me achieve missing my beloved family without yearning that they quite miss me in return!

Within this passage, Salinger illustrates the overwhelming burden of ego in every action, even with something as simple as handing someone's hat back to them. Seymour's message is clear: we should strive to act compassionately without seeking approval. We

should project love outwardly, without hope of reciprocation. And we should abandon that sense of self-importance, that ego. But how do we rid ourselves of this most pressing heaviness which originates in the individual, but is then perpetuated in earnest throughout society?

That was the question, how? I had already isolated the problem—ego. The ox was cornered. Now, I somehow needed to tame it.

5.

Herding the Ox



*"The rope is coarse and heavy in hand;  
His raw, callused fingers gripped tightly,  
Afraid the ox will return to the mist—*

*But a well-tended ox begins to follow,  
And soon drags the rope himself."*

Maybe nirvana was what I went searching for when I moved into the woods of Marquette, Michigan during the fall of 2005. Maybe it was death. Both nirvana and death translate as freedom from earthly existence, and that was what I sought in a way. But then again, maybe it was simply the mystery of the unknown and the unfamiliar that intrigued me, like darkness, or the deep forest, or what lies deep in the ocean. Maybe there is no difference—they all hold the same captivating fear and allure.

My initial intentions were clear—I wanted to lose ego. To release and eliminate that extreme burden I have always carried. I thought the only possible way to do so, was to escape into the woods. There I'd find true existence, even if the concept of *true existence* still eluded me. I knew that at the most basic level, to exist was to survive.

And to survive, essential needs must be met. I wanted to become intimate with those essential needs.

Like Salinger, who I believed had left the literary world to escape the life and reality he had become so attached to, I intended to leave the world I had become so attached to—one of comfort and ease. The materialism of American society had begun to stifle me. The year prior to moving into the woods I had lived in a furnished, five bedroom house, with working appliances, electricity, heat, and fresh potable water. We owned five televisions, a pool table, and a homemade bar.

When that lifestyle eventually began to bother me, I wasn't sure why. I had everything. Life was good. Life was comfortable. I should have been happy. And yet, I felt more detached from my own human experience than ever. I had forgotten how to look at the sky in wonder; I had forgotten how to pluck a dandelion and stare at the many concentric rings of petals; I had forgotten how to catch fireflies between cupped hands and watch the abdomen pulse and swell with lemon florescence. I had simply lost touch. Everything I experienced was through some filter, and with each hour of TV I watched, each microwave dinner I ate, and each pillow I placed beneath my head, I had become an observer of my own life.

In *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau writes, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” I longed for similar—to return to the rhythms we share with the world around us and with the universe. Like many before me, I fled to the closest portal that I knew of: nature. The



soil and the earth held answers, answers I could only attune to if I embraced the natural world completely.

In a college anthropology class, my professor drew a circle on the chalkboard to represent the world, and beside the world, she drew a stick figure with one hand touching it. This portrayed the relationship between man and the natural world in an industrialized nation. Then she drew another circle. This time, she placed the stick figure entirely within the circle, which represented the relationship foraging societies had with the natural world. In the book, *Sacred Hoop*, Paula Gunn Allen elaborates on this worldview from an American Indian perspective:

The earth is not a mere source of survival, distant from the creatures it nurtures and from the spirit that breathes in us, nor is it to be considered an inert resource on which we draw in order to keep our ideological self functioning [. . .] We must not conceive of the earth as an ever-dead other that supplies us with a sense of ego identity by virtue of our contrast to its perceived nonbeing. Rather, for American Indians [. . .], the earth *is* being, as all creatures are also being: aware, palpable, intelligent, alive.

According to Allen, the American Indians do not perceive the world or external events in terms of dualities or hierarchies. The dualistic mind, especially towards nature, simply does not exist. The people are indivisible from the land. They live within the natural processes, ebbing and flowing much like the seasons, much like life and death.

In Western culture, I grew up with a worldview that revolved around consumerism and exploitation of the land and resources. As a child, I didn't ever think about it. I was comfortable and safe, and I appreciated how fortunate I was. But as I grew older and learned more about the different approaches to the world, I felt disenchanted, and trapped within the confines of American society, of consumerism and

instant gratification. Only through literal detachment, I believed, could I transcend my dualistic mind.

So I moved into the woods. My last semester of college had arrived and I had an opportunity. Late August marked the beginning of my journey, and I intended to stay in the woods until the snow hit late November or December. Packing up my 2000 Ford Explorer with several essentials (tent, tarps, pots, pans, sleeping bag, clothes, hatchet, fishing gear, knife, headlamp, survival kit), I headed for the Upper Peninsula. I arrived in Marquette, Michigan, and followed one of the county roads out of town to where I knew of a good camping spot. I veered onto a two-track and parked about a mile into the woods, where the two-track sidled up to the Carp River. There, nestled between two low ridges, was a peninsula at the convergence of two rivers: Morgan Creek and Carp River. Morgan Creek cascaded down from the ridge into a large pool at the foot of the camp, and flowed out to meet the Carp River which rippled along the opposite side of the peninsula. Places of confluence were considered mystical by the Natives, and my chosen peninsula felt right. I could make a home out there.

My lifestyle changed dramatically that first afternoon out at the camp. I had to think about each and every action. My well-being depended on my two hands. First I had to establish a shelter. I set up a small tent at the end of the peninsula. Beside it, I tied up a tarp that sheltered my cooking gear and tools. Next, I hustled up the ridge and into the woods in search of firewood to cook my meals. There were remnants of a fire pit near my tent, so I rebuilt it with a few rocks and kindled a fire to boil rice and beans. After dinner, I ran up the ridge to where the car was parked and stashed my food to prevent any animals from entering camp. For the remaining daylight, I sat beside the

dwindling fire, and listened to the cascade of the waterfall, and to the flow of the two rivers. I watched the leaves above me rustle and shake when wind passed through the boughs. I rubbed my hands together and felt the caked dirt crumble between my palms. My feet were touching the soil, and I could feel them touching it. A new breath was entering my body. I felt connected. I felt alive.

The next morning I awoke and bathed in the river. I slipped out of my clothes and tiptoed into the deepest pool of water, carefully avoiding sharp rocks. With each step, the cold rushed between my toes and around my ankles, up along the back of my legs and into my spine. I hesitated, prolonging the initial plunge, which was always the most difficult. But after the frigid waters penetrated my core and seeped into my skull, I relaxed. I sat in the middle of the river and let the current of water curl around my body. I reached after small fish hovering nearby.

After the bath, I stoked the fire to cook oatmeal and heat up water for coffee. Then I packed up for the day and cycled several miles back into town along the county road. I stayed on campus until evening. My biology classes lasted through the afternoon, which I followed up with homework until evening soccer practice. After practice, I cycled back to camp, rekindled the fire and cooked a supper consisting of rice and beans, or sautéed vegetables. When the sun set, I settled into my two-person tent with a headlamp, reading and writing until I drifted off to sleep—a sleep that was never quite deep enough for me to make it through an entire night without waking at least once. Then at first light, I headed back into the river.

Life was simple and meaningful. In *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau writes, “Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off the track by every

nutshell and mosquito's wing that falls on the rails." Only after living in the woods can I truly appreciate the significance of this statement, how simple and yet how complex. It reads almost like a haiku. And I had only experienced a glimpse of what he discusses in *Walden*. I was still a part of society for half of my days, still caught up in campus life. But at the same time, I was able to experience the contrast between two ways of life. Further on, Thoreau writes, "In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages." He reiterates the significance of the present moment, which is an essential Buddhist teaching. Out in the woods, I learned to live presently. I learned to value each action out in the woods, because each action had a purpose. With far fewer distractions, I discovered a new world, or perhaps, recovered a world from my childhood—I was in tuned to the animals around me, to the changing of the leaves, and to the changing water level in the river.

All through college, I had studied science, and I endlessly sought answers to the world around me and all of its intricacies. With science, life was meaningful—everything in nature occurred for a reason and could be explained. But after four years, I didn't *know* the world any better—I simply knew more *about* the world. Studying science created a distance between me and nature, and established a sort of hierarchy and dominator mentality towards it. Science reinforced my dualistic thinking. The natural world was still an external. In six short weeks, I reached an intimacy with the natural world that textbooks could never grant me. In the woods, I was able to perceive of the interconnectedness of everything around me, which allowed me to grow as an individual in the context of something greater.

Then in the middle of October, six weeks after I began, my time in the woods came to an abrupt end. I arrived back to camp late one night to find my car broken into, vandalized, and looted. All eight windows of the vehicle were shattered or broken out, including the windshield. Blood and booze speckled the doors. A key had been broken off in the ignition. My clothes were thrown outside the vehicle. Guitar, CDs, tool kit, and fishing gear, all stolen.

The vandalism and theft was the true test. When my retreat in the woods began, it was about abandoning my material possessions and comforts. The vandalism forced me to reevaluate how attached I really was to my possessions, the few remaining that I had brought with me into the woods. In the past, anything bad that happened to me triggered an overwhelming sense of vengeance, or, a complete withdrawal into depression. Neither happened this time. For the first time, I accepted the sequence of events. I remained in the present moment. I had had those things, and now I didn't. My life, my being wasn't determined by a car or a guitar. In losing *my things*, I discovered a greater appreciation for who and what I was—the theft confirmed my identity. I had passed the test.

What determines identity? Is it in what we own, or in how people perceive us? Do we only become *who* we are through reflections in social and material externals? In an ego-driven society, I find the questions difficult to answer. I want to say “No,” my identity is not determined by my reputation among peers, or by my material wealth. I think that that perceived identity belongs to my ego, an existence dependent on externals, rather than something more innate. In *Sacred Hoop*, Paula Gunn Allen offers an American Indian perception: “[. . .] to traditional American Indians, social and personal

life is governed by internal rather than external factors, and systems based on spiritual orders rather than on material ones are necessarily heavily oriented toward internal governing mechanisms.”

Our true existence can shine through all opaqueness if only ego’s smudged windows were wiped clean of the distractions and false importances we rely on. Just to unravel the mind once, and take what we know, what we are comfortable with, and toss it into the air like confetti with no hope of repair, even if none of the pieces blow away, then we might be able to tap into *true existence*. And what should we expect to find? What lies behind it all? What lies at the core?

The true human, the true being lies at the core. *Our* true human being. How we exist within the greater universe, beyond our dualistic mode of thinking, beyond our expectations and priorities.

Thoreau once wrote, “Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The solid earth! The actual world! The common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we?” Living in the woods, experiencing life outside of my comforts enabled a shift in perception—it allowed me to transcend ego, only briefly, and there I discovered not just more about the world around me, but more about myself, something that existed all the while, something vital, something real and alive. The time to return home with the ox had come.

6.

Riding the Ox and Returning Home



*"I take my time and wander towards home,  
the ox and I now one.*

*The melodies of flutes drift along the rugged path,  
And we bob in perfect rhythm—*

*Each sound is distinct and beautiful,  
and even we are music."*

I have had a problem with forming expectations for as long as I can remember. When I was younger, I tended to live moments, days, and years ahead of the present, crafting fantasies of how I pictured a situation to play out. I was completely attached to my mental patterns, and I accepted that—expectations were just a part of who I was. However, the reality was that I had become trapped within my own constructs of what life should be like, or look like, or feel like. As when winter comes, most of us throw on a thin base layer, perhaps a middle layer, and a heavy outer shell in order to weather the cold. In the same way, I formed expectations that insulated me from the raw, present elements of my life. For example, holidays needed to proceed in a certain way—especially Christmas. In fact, Christmas only became Christmas if a certain number of

conditions were met: I had to watch specific Christmas movies including *Rudolph*, *Frosty*, *Clay-mation's Christmas*, and *The Grinch*; my mom had to bake toffee, pfeffernusse cookies, and buckeyes, and I had to help her; my brothers and I had to wake up early and jump on my parents' bed Christmas morning; and Santa had to answer every single one of my wishes. For a few years, I went as far as to sit in the same room as the Christmas tree, in a very particular lighting, for a specific number of days before Christmas—if I didn't, Christmas just wasn't Christmas. It was borderline OCD, and all due to expectations.

In the spring of 2006, I decided to hike the Appalachian Trail, a 2,175 mile hiking trail that runs through thirteen states along the east coast of the United States, from Georgia to Maine. I was joined by my cousin Mike and two college friends, Ryan and Linzi, and on March 29<sup>th</sup>, we left Amicalola State Park in Georgia, and walked into the wilderness in hopes of reaching Mount Katahdin in Baxter State Park, Maine, some 2,000 miles north.

Prior to my departure from Amicalola, things were no different. I set expectations for every facet of the hike. I expected to thru-hike the A.T. I expected to hike a specific number of miles a day. I expected people to be and act a certain way. And in addition, the hike marked the second phase in my attempt to abandon ego. The previous fall I had lived out of a tent in the woods, and in returning to the woods for five months, carrying only the essentials, and meeting people in an arena with far fewer distractions, I ultimately expected to find a purer way of life where ego was nonexistent.

But the future did not matter on the trail. The number of miles hiked did not matter. The “pure” way of life I was looking for did not matter—not to everyday life.



Everyday life was unpredictable, and I needed to suspend all expectations if I wanted to last on the trail. I realized this my first two nights. I spent the first night staring at the ceiling of a wooden shelter (a three-sided wooden structure for hikers to sleep in), afraid that if I turned onto my stomach or inhaled too deeply I would acquire Hantavirus, a rare but deadly respiratory infection contracted through exposure to mice and rat droppings. The following night, I camped at a shelter rumored to have had recent bear cub sightings. I spent the night in my tent, turning from side to side, tensing up at every single sound.

I knew something had to change. So on the third night, I intentionally put myself in a situation I felt certain would not turn out as expected. What did I have to lose? I spent the previous two nights thinking the whole experience would be easy, only to realize how little my expectations mattered and how little control I had. A thunderstorm had been forecast that evening, and still I decided to set up my tent at the foot of a small hill instead of sleep in the shelter. If a thunderstorm moved through and flooded me from my spot, I would have to react in the moment. I would be forced to embrace the present, rather than dwell within my old patterns and habits. I had transformed my sleeping experience into a mission.

Sure enough around midnight, I felt the steady trickle of water seep under my back and I heard thunder drum in the sky. I had to do something. I had to move, fast. So I grabbed my sleeping bag and inflatable mattress pad, the only gear I could not afford to get wet, and rushed toward the shelter guided by the light of my headlamp and flashes of lightning. As I approached, I saw a shadow crouched beneath the shelter. Two iridescent eyes reflected the light of my headlamp, and suddenly, an animal lunged at me, barking and baring its teeth. I stopped and briefly hesitated, then realized it was a fellow hiker's

dog. I ran towards him and dove beneath the shelter to escape the rain. With all my obsessive thoughts and worries, I could not have chosen a worse spot to sleep. I had only about two feet between the mud I slept on, and the bottom of the shelter which appeared to be overriden with spider webs and rodent nests. I couldn't even think about what else inhabited the damp, dark place. Almost immediately, I discovered a silver-dollar-sized, hairy-legged creature crawling up the inside of my sleeping bag. It had actually turned as bad as I could imagine. But after that, the dog curled up beside me, and I managed to have my best night's sleep. That night set the tone for the rest of my trip.

I never had a problem falling asleep after that, but the element of unpredictability still frightened me. Even if my expectations often led to disappointment, at least I could count on something, and I appreciated that comfort. Within the week, however, I realized how the unpredictable, although frightening, can be good. I arrived at this realization due to the unexpected kindness of total strangers. I cannot count how many times I received "trail magic"—unexpected treasures and services left by the local community or by previous thru-hikers. We stumbled upon juice boxes in a waterfall, sodas in a creek, beer and food left beside the trail, and so many others.

One afternoon in New Jersey during a thunderstorm, I stumbled upon a big van parked at a road crossing. "Irish," a middle-aged thru-hiker from Ireland, had borrowed the van from a friend nearby and offered to take a bunch of us thru-hikers to his friend's house for dinner and a warm, dry place to sleep. I quickly accepted and hopped into the van as he pushed sodas and cookies into my hands. Later that evening the couple who took us in cooked us a warm meal, washed our wet, smelly clothes, and offered up couches and beds to sleep on. They wanted nothing in return.

In Dalton, Massachusetts, I stopped to fill up my water bottle outside a man's house where a sign advertised free water. The man, Tom Lavery, saw me from the kitchen window and came out to introduce himself. Then he invited me in for ice cream, a pasta dinner, and a place to sleep on his living room floor. Six hikers stayed with him that night. How could expectations ever compare?

Halfway through Virginia I met a woman from Israel name Kutsa. Every spring and summer she headed out into the Appalachian Mountains in hopes of completing her lifelong goal of thru-hiking the AT. In 2003 she turned around three miles from the final summit. She had a debilitating fear of heights, of any open expanse above sea level. The year 2006 marked her fourth attempt to reach Katahdin. Something kept her coming back. She said she simply wanted to complete the trail, but when she talked about seeing bears in the wild—how she affectionately clutched her chest as she explained how nothing compares to the sight of a bear—I knew something else kept her out there. And I don't think the end goal had anything to do with it.

Kutsa joined me south of Shenandoah National Park and we hiked the remainder of Virginia and all of Pennsylvania together. She was an avid Kurt Vonnegut fan, and that common interest sparked a close friendship. She and I often hiked together sharing long conversations. One evening, as we scaled the rocks of northern Pennsylvania while the horizon ushered in the amber sun, she said, "Walking the trail is our first real taste of freedom. We get to think about what we choose. We have no obligations, no deadlines, nothing to worry about."

Her comment came at the close of a particularly eventful day. Earlier that morning, we had awakened to a downpour, and proceeded to hike out towards the next shelter. As soon as we entered the thick canopy of the Pennsylvania forest, the rain slowed and the clouds dissipated. The early afternoon sun shattered through the treetops and glistened off the raindrops balancing on branches and ferns. Kutsa had mentioned that there was a restaurant just up the trail at the next highway crossing, so we decided to have lunch there. We drank beer and ate hot, greasy food, and by the end of a three hour lunch, agreed to hike only to the next shelter, six or seven miles ahead. Prior to this day, I had set strict mile goals that, for the most part, I adhered to, but which kept me from the freedom Kutsa spoke of. For Kutsa, time constraints were an unnecessary human construct. Her philosophy was to enjoy the circumstances of hiking through the woods. To hike was to be free.

I remember sitting around a picnic table during supper one evening, when Kutsa explained to me how every so often, something would begin to move inside her, some restlessness, insisting she move on. She had a husband and a home in Montreal, Canada, but she would just get up and go when the urge compelled her.

I don't think Kutsa ever did intend to finish the A.T., not in the way most thru-hikers do. She may still have the goal sitting in the back of her mind, but everything she said to me, in fact her entire mindset, suggested a different reason. It was the moments, those unpredictable moments, like finding a juice box in a waterfall, or experiencing the awe and wonder of watching a bear appear over a ridge—even something as subtle as listening to a middle-aged man say at first morning's light, "I saw two big beautiful deer run across the ridgeline," with an ageless sparkle in his eyes.

Several weeks later, at the border of Pennsylvania and New Jersey, she separated from our group because she could not keep our pace. The morning she left, she told me, “Out here we live every moment of every day.” And we did. We lived every single moment. We had no other choice. Unexpected things would inevitably happen. Living in the Appalachian Mountains for five months, and passing through unfamiliar towns required us to constantly remain present and aware of the situation.

I remember eating lunch late one afternoon beside a tall maple tree. I heard a rustling of leaves somewhere nearby, but when I looked around the noise stopped. The leaves rustled again. I looked again, but nothing. For five minutes I thought I was going crazy. The noise intensified, and the rustling occurred more and more frequently. I searched frantically, but still nothing. I imagined a snake slithering through the brush, or a giant spider inching up to me from behind. I took a deep breath and waited for the next sound. When it came, I stopped trying to peer through the ferns and wildflowers, and focused in close. Several feet away on the dark earth, a caterpillar sat chewing on a leaf. Not overly indulgent, the caterpillar methodically worked from one end of the leaf to the other, and then back again. In the absence of all the white noise of civilization, my senses had reached an entirely new level of clarity, finely tuned to my immediate surroundings—so much so, that I could hear something as gentle as the moving mandibles of a butterfly larvae.

In the mountains of Massachusetts, I remember standing at the edge of Holt’s ledge, a 2100 foot cliff, while rain poured down and forty mile per hour winds blew raindrops upwards. It was a rare feeling to feel such vulnerability, to truly feel the

transience of my mortality. I felt liberated to stand amidst all the elements and stand without fear, but with peace in the beauty of it all.

I embarked on the Appalachian Trail expecting that there was a “pure” way of life. I embarked on the trail expecting a whole lot of things. Come to find out, those expectations only bound me to the past and to the future while distancing me from my immediate experience. I used to take comfort in that. On the trail, however, every single day was a mystery. Every single moment was full of potential, and for good or for bad, I felt alive.

One afternoon as I hiked into the town of Duncannon, Pennsylvania, a wasp, prehistoric in size, collided with my eye socket and stung the flesh around my eye. Somehow it got disoriented, maybe even lost in my face and continued to sting me as I spun in circles, flailing my arms and trying to scoop the invader from my eye socket. My face swelled up, my eye flooded with water, and the stinging sensation intensified. I was miserable, but not upset. There was no reason to complain. I felt alive.

Another afternoon, while hiking alone through the mountains of Virginia, something began to shake and rustle beneath a sea of trillium. Then all of a sudden, something darted directly towards me, the trillium bending and parting like a shark fin through water. I hesitated, screamed, and then ran down the trail. Behind me I saw a ruffed grouse clucking and flapping its wings bidding me good-riddance. The experience was terrifying. But still, I felt alive.

I discovered that adventures like the A.T. distil life down to a few basic essentials, which forces us to reevaluate the heavy role that perception has on our reality. The A.T.

granted me perception into a world filled with a constant barrage of new and unfamiliar moments. This enabled me to embrace the present instead of living two steps in the future. With this understanding came a new appreciation for the uncertainty, the discomfort, and the challenges. And I relished it.

After the final ascent of Katahdin, I hitched a ride with another hiker back to Bangor. During the drive, I noticed the high cirrus clouds through the car window, knowing what a beautiful day tomorrow would be, with unspoken reverence for what I could not predict about the future. Over the five months I spent in the woods, I developed an intimate relationship with nature: the clouds were neither friends nor enemies, but entities I had to be constantly aware of them because they affected my life; trees were not only big plants, but daily they would touch me, shelter me, dance with me, and threaten me when strong winds passed through the boughs; my awareness of my surroundings reached a new level—to where I could perceive the sound of a caterpillar eating lunch, to where I could feel a tick the size of a pinhead crawl across my skin.

From the car window, I could only look. I could not smell the trees and flowers, nor feel the crisp and rich earthiness. I could not feel the wind and rain, nor hear the squirrels and birds. A cloud was only a cloud again, and a tree a tree. I was once again a spectator of the world, rather than a participant in it.

Out on the trail I discovered that the best way to live was to have my body, mind, and spirit in corresponding proximities. Since my body is always and forever in the present, I intend for my mind and spirit to follow suit.

## The Ox Transcended



*"He has ridden the ox home, but there is no ox,  
Still he knows he is home, and that the ox brought him,*

*So he hangs the abandoned rope  
beside the dusty yoke."*

I was only a month into my fourteenth year when I smoked marijuana for the first time. My buddy Ryan arrived at my locker that afternoon with slender tube of what appeared to be an Elmer's Glue Stick. Inside the empty casing though, instead of glue, lay a small joint.

"How about Halloween night?" he asked.

"Okay," I said. "If we stay in my neighborhood, we can smoke in the park."

That night, a group of us wandered through my neighborhood dressed in masks and capes. We ran through the streets quoting funny movies and eating Tootsie Pops and snack-sized Butterfingers. We were teenagers and bathed in the freedom of our adolescence as everyone else tucked themselves away from the clouds and pouring rain. When the rest of our group parted ways, Ryan and I snuck into my backyard. We lit the



joint up next to my trampoline and puffed silently, taking deep breaths, anxious and frightened by the new experience.

I was brought up believing that drugs were for losers and criminals. But in high school, this didn't compute. My older brother drank and smoked and he was popular and had tons of cool friends. I came to believe that drugs and alcohol signified maturity and provided one with a certain status. Others revered you as one of the brave who broke the rules and experimented with the unfamiliar. I equated drugs with acceptance and popularity, and at the age of fourteen, very little else mattered to me. Smoking and drinking had become a sort of rite of passage into manhood.

Later in college, I realized there was something more to the drugs, especially the psychotropic plants. I read books on peyote and psilocybin mushrooms. During my semester abroad in Spain, I attended a music fest in the town of Caceres, where I met a Spaniard named Sergio. As we stood at the gate to the festival entrance, drinking wine and beer, he asked, "Do you want to know the secret to life? Take mushrooms and lay down in your bed with the lights off." I had heard the same advice many times before—that psychedelics offer a new perception, a glimpse of something beyond our working reality. Yet I had already experimented with mushrooms my freshman year of college and had found them more frightening than enlightening.

That was before I understood the spiritual realm of the psychedelics. In fact, that was before I had ever heard of the term, "altered state of consciousness." This wasn't surprising because altered states of consciousness are not celebrated in the United States' culture, except for alcohol, but we do not regard it as such. However, many other cultures around the world revere altered states of consciousness. Altered states of

consciousness are highly sacred and spiritual. Rituals and ceremonies revolve around them in some cultures. Some cultures deify them, and governance is transmitted to those who venture to altered states.

In South America, shamans reach altered states of consciousness through sensory deprivation. They take vision quests and retreat into caves for months at a time. Yogis in India reach altered states of consciousness through meditation. They meditate in caves for months at a time. The Nevada Paiute once performed the ghost dance, a long and repetitive ritual dance, to reach an altered state of consciousness. Some cultures use sweat lodges. Some encourage fasting. Some pray. Some use heated rocks and drums. And many cultures have used and still use psychotropic plants to reach altered states of consciousness.

Terrance McKenna, in his book, *Food of the Gods*, argues that the human brain evolved at such a rapid rate due to exposure to psilocybin mushrooms, and to whatever other accessible psychedelics grew regionally at the time. He argues that when we moved from a life in the trees, we entered the meadows and prairies and became bipedal. And in those meadows, we discovered psilocybin mushrooms. For centuries, there has been rumored use of psilocybin mushrooms by Native Americans in traditional ceremonies and rituals. In his book, McKenna revisits ancient sketches and carvings and explains the prevalence of mushrooms in native art all over the world. In the book, he claims we can still grow with the aid of them. He supports this claim by pointing to many indigenous cultures in South America and Africa which continue to use these psychedelics to treat illness, and for spiritual growth. They regard psychedelics as

spiritual deities, as medicinal cures, as peace and harmony. They believe that, with psychedelics, they can communicate with the universe.

Even though shamanism has always fascinated me, I never fully respected nor revered the spiritual and therapeutic benefits of the plants they use. This was partially due to a clouded consciousness, and partially due to the heavy taboo against drugs that was instilled in me at an early age. However, the more I researched psychedelics and altered states of consciousness, and the more people I talked with, the more I believed that these plants could bring me closer to true being by allowing me to transcend my dualistic mode of thinking. Psychedelics were a method for me to abandon ego and transcend the ego.

My first experience with marijuana as a spiritual ally occurred two months into my twenty-fourth year, a decade after my first experience that Halloween night with Ryan. I rolled a joint, rode my bike down to a hiking trail in Marquette, Michigan, and experienced the drug wholly, alone and otherwise sober, in order to gain further understanding of its spiritual properties. The month was November and a smattering of the year's first snow covered the trail and the tops of shrubs and wildflowers. Winter was approaching, the daylight had begun to shorten, and the vibrant colors had turned brown and drab. I walked along the Dead River near Tourist Park while observing my thought patterns and enjoying the overcast, windy afternoon. I spent hours outside, touching the tree branches and investigating animal tracks on the shore of the river.

When I returned to my apartment at dusk, I started to feel "high." Paranoia slowly crept over me, and I felt self-conscious. Did my roommates know I was "high"? I walked into my bedroom and lay down in bed wondering. As I looked around the

room, the paranoia increased. Every single object in the room reflected me: the stereo, the blow-up mattress, the lamp, the bookshelf, the dresser. All of them defined me in a way. They were of course *my* possessions, but they also possessed me—they determined *who* I was. The posters, the clothes, the books, the CDs, all shaped my identity. In a way, I only existed because of them. In realizing this, I became self-conscious, aware of my ‘self’ and the “stoned” condition I was in.

Out in the woods, I owned not one tree or blade of grass, not one acorn or fallen leaf. I felt no judgment in the woods because the trees and bushes and grasses did not define me, just as I did not define them. They did not determine or reflect *who* I was, because we were essentially the same thing, coexisting out in the wilderness. I wasn’t “high,” I wasn’t “stoned,” I wasn’t in an altered state of mind—I simply was.

Three months later, I traveled to Ecuador over Spring Break to visit two friends, Brian and Candace, who were student-teaching in Quito for a year. But I wasn’t there only to visit them—I was there to find a shaman who would guide me through an ayahuasa ceremony.

Shamanic cultures of the Amazon have used ayahuasca, a hallucinogenic tea, in spiritual healing ceremonies for centuries. The tea is made from the bark of a vine and the leaves of a plant containing DMT, or dimethyltryptamine, a psychoactive compound naturally occurring in the human body in trace amounts. By inducing visions, often of animal spirits and different worlds, the tea is believed to help shamans communicate with the natural world, and with their ancestors. Shamans administer the tea to others in order to heal illnesses like depression and to purge the body of parasites and toxins.

Brian, Candace, and I entered the jungle on my fifth day in Ecuador. The day prior we had traveled ten hours by bus to Tena, a bordering jungle town, and had stayed in a hostel downtown. The following morning we hitched a ride out of town with an Eco-tourist group and followed a guide into the thick canopy of the jungle, trudging through deep mud and lush vegetation. Vines loomed above in great sinewy strands and twisted up the trees like thick tendons around muscle. Insects looked prehistoric and grew larger than my fist. After a mile walk through the jungle, we emerged into a large opening with several wooden huts spread throughout. We had reached the small indigenous community of the Machakuyaku tribe.

Later that evening, after a long day of tourist activities, we gathered in a thatched-roof hut to participate in an ayahuasca ceremony with the community shaman. Brian and I, along with two other tourists and two of the shaman's helpers, sat on two long wooden benches. The shaman, shirtless, sat in a single chair at the head of us. Because he only spoke Quechua, a native South American language, his translator stood behind him and narrated the ceremony in Spanish. We began in darkness with the only source of light coming from two small torches lit on either side of the shaman. The narrator explained the significance of ayahuasca, how, traditionally, shamans used ayahuasca as a spiritual guide to communicate with the natural world and with their ancestors. Others in the community ingested the tea during healing ceremonies. Ayahuasca was said to purge the body and free the mind. Then he described the process of the ceremony. First, the shaman would drink a portion of the brew from a hollowed out gourd, and then he would pass a portion to each of us. We were to follow the ayahuasca with a swig of *agua de florida*, a cologne used as part of the healing process. Then we would smoke *mapachos*,

or special tobacco cigarettes. As the brew took effect, the shaman would sing an *icaro*—a song of power used to communicate with the spirit of the plant and to drive our visions. Then he would do individual spiritual cleansings for each one of us.

My turn to drink the ayahuasca came and I glanced down at the thick earthy mixture glistening in the torchlight. I held the gourd up to my mouth and swallowed the chalky liquid. Then I took a swig of *agua de florida*, which tasted like moonshine. For some reason everyone was spitting on a metal plate filled with ash which we passed around at our feet. I spit on the plate, and passed it to person beside me. After we all drank the ayahuasca, the shaman helped himself to two more portions of the tea. The apprentice extinguished the torches and passed out the *mapachos* for us to smoke. The smoke was considered to be another powerful medicine in the spiritual healing process, similar to the *agua de florida*. Then he began to sing the *icaro*. While he sang, he shook a leaf-bundle rattle called a *shacapa*. We all sat back against the wooden benches listening to the *sshhhh. . .sshhhh. . .sshhhh* of the rattle as the Shaman carried us through the ceremony with song. The song seemed to vibrate in the darkness and I became lost in the sound. His voice changed intonations, and he kept a steady rhythm like the beat of a drum. I listened and stared off into the darkness. The colors came, vibrant violet and blue over some distant shadow of a mountain. I saw eyes approach me—the piercing glares of feline eyes and avian eyes. I looked off to the sky through the canopy of trees and saw everything in my frame of vision begin to vibrate and blur. Then I realized the personal cleansings had begun. After the shaman finished cleansing Brian, he called me up and I sat before him. He circled me several times and shook the *shacapa* up and down my back and my sides, and around my head. He grabbed my head and pressed his mouth

to the top of my skull, then blew forcefully into my head three times. Shortly after, he ran off into the grass puking, and walked away for ten minutes to release his bowels. None of the rest of us ran off to purge. We never experienced the full potency of the psychedelic. I didn't reach that alternate reality I had hoped to. There was no great spiritual discovery.

But I did learn something. Experiencing an authentic ayahuasca ceremony in the heart of the Amazon jungle should have been the most incredible experience of my lifetime. Instead I felt disappointed, mainly because I had once again set such high expectations. If only I could have realized the beauty of the experience in the very moment it was occurring, perhaps I would have come away with more. Instead, I was blind—futilely searching for whatever it was I thought would bring me closer to Truth.

My quest was still not complete. I still needed that profound spiritual discovery, and I believed that perhaps the answer lay in psilocybin mushrooms. Upon my return to Marquette, I decided to go on a journey with mushrooms which would involve two stages, one involving an interaction with nature, the other strictly involving an interaction with my mind through sensory deprivation. I ingested the mushrooms in my apartment some time during the early spring and had my roommate, Joe, drive me out into the woods for an hour. This was stage one. I climbed a mountain-top and sat there looking off at Lake Superior, swaying with the trees, watching one huge mass of foliage undulating to the rhythms of the wind. An overwhelming sensation of love came over me as I sat up on the mountain and tears filled my eyes. As the darkness moved in, I descended through the forest, looking for the spot I had arranged to meet Joe.

Meanwhile, the mushroom trip had intensified and I began to experience a continual sensation of déjà vu. Everything was familiar from another time, but I couldn't discern from when. The physical world looked differently to me—trees and rocks had turned different shades—but the landscape felt familiar, and comforting. I was alone, but I didn't feel alone. At one point, I became lost within some matrix of reality. I stopped perceiving of my physical reality, forgot I was still walking, and began communicating with someone or something—I remember listening and smiling—but when I shifted back to the physical reality, I didn't remember where I had just been. I'm still trying to make sense of that. Then I walked out to the road, found the car, and drove back home with Joe. When we reached the apartment, I went to my room to lie down and close my eyes, to cut myself off from all sensory perception. This was stage two. Four years earlier Sergio had explained that lying down in the darkness was the only way to truly experience mushrooms. Terrance McKenna confirmed this in his book.

Sitting in bed, I returned to the infinite I had once reached during childhood while staring up at the black steel rungs of the bunk bed. My senses heightened and my thoughts sped up. The same fear developed inside, the same endless void of existence which my logical mind could not grasp. Then I became the infinite. Everything peeled away, layer by layer. At one point, I felt my body sink through my blow-up mattress and disappear, and all that was left was my mind. I felt as if my body had expired, as if I had died, and yet my consciousness continued to evaluate my situation. In a way, my body and mind became two separate entities. But if so, which one of me existed? This terrified me. I tried to maintain my sense of self and my sense of reality, but I was lost. I needed to focus on something. I tried to watch a movie with Joe. I could only find



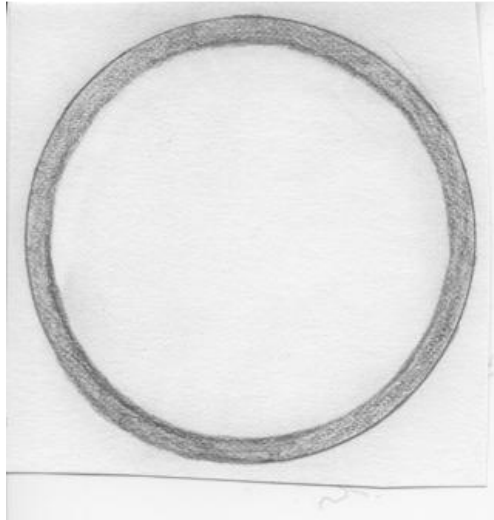
comfort in physical activities like going to the bathroom, or eating, or drinking water. These activities provided focus. Everything else was lost to me—I had no control over my experience, and I had no control over my fear. I wanted to return to the state I was in before I reached the infinite.

With this experience, my struggle with ego came to a head, and the mushrooms had facilitated the encounter. I briefly returned to my dualistic mode of thinking, and yes, I could perceive of mind and matter as two separate entities, but that wasn't an absolute because I couldn't distinguish those entities from anything else. Where was my body and where was my mind? In what realm of existence were they in? My mind soared towards the infinite. What else lay in that beyond? Maybe everything. Maybe nothing. Whatever I discovered was within me, but at the same time, I couldn't distinguish what existed within from what existed without. I had reached a state of transcendence—transcendence of my dualistic mode of thinking. There was no distinction between “me” and the rest of the world.

Although, the psychedelics brought me to this cusp of perception and beyond, any avenue to an altered state of consciousness—meditation, sensory deprivation, song and dance, etc.—can potentially do the same. The important matter was in breaking down that narrow perception, that dualistic mode of thinking.

8.

The Ox and Man, Both Transcended



*"What is left when nothing is left?  
The sky, an endless expanse,  
And the buzz of a honey bee is lost in the bud of a flower.*

*A fluid exchange from solid to gas and back again,  
And there, sitting among the ancient teachers  
You appear."*

When I first walked into 253 Gries Hall at Northern Michigan University, I was nervous but confident that I wanted Tesshin Paul Lehmberg as my thesis director. My project was nonfiction and concentrated on J.D. Salinger, ego, and Zen Buddhism. Tesshin is a Soto Zen Buddhist priest and a professor of non-fiction. He was the only possible choice.

"What's your experience with Zen?" he said to my request.

"I don't know, I'm quite familiar with Zen philosophy," I managed to stammer. I've always felt strangely connected to Zen, but I didn't know I'd be challenged so quickly.

"Have you ever practiced zazen?" He asked, referring to the traditional form of meditation practiced in Zen Buddhism.

“No, not really.”

A quiet smile spread across his face. He said, “Well, that’s kind of like going to a restaurant and eating the menu to taste the food.”

I relaxed and smiled. So I would have to experience zazen. I had thought my exposure to Zen philosophy was extensive, but to be honest, it didn’t extend much farther than Salinger. After I left 253 Gries and did a quick internet search, I discovered that zazen lay at the very core of Zen philosophy, the “hara” or soul of the entire tradition.

But even without meditation, I felt connected to Zen in my own way. The Koans, J.D. Salinger, Zen poetry, Haikus, all the explanations and descriptions, the beauty and simplicity, all resonated so deeply—I really thought I knew Zen. Meditation seemed pointless. What could *sitting* do for me? I had read about meditation, and had heard others talk about it. I had spent significant time contemplating the practice. However, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that my hesitancy masked a fear. The prospect of meditating frightened me. I was afraid to challenge my knowledge of Zen philosophy, fearing I’d discover I didn’t truly understand Zen at all.

From that point, I searched internet sites and checked out books from the library by Alan Watts and D.T. Suzuki. I even took an instructional one Sunday morning at Lake Superior Zendo with Tesshin to better understand Zen Buddhism and the practice of zazen. I arrived early to the Zendo that morning, dressed in a dark t-shirt and dark lounge pants. I stopped at the doorway to the meditation room, bowed, and slowly walked to an empty cushion on the opposite side of the room, taking care to walk behind the altar adorned with a sculpture of Buddha and a thin stick of incense disappearing into heavy strands of smoke. I kneeled onto the soft rectangular pad before me, called a zabuton,

and fluffed the soft dense sphere of fabric and stuffing, called a zafu, which I used to sit on during zazen. I faced the wall, crossed my legs together, and propped my butt up with the zafu until the tops of my feet and both of my knees rested on the zabuton. The lower half of my body was set. Then I straightened my posture—my back and neck held straight, my chin parallel to my shoulders, my mouth closed, my tongue resting against my upper teeth, and my eyes slightly opened. I cupped my left hand inside my right and formed an oval with the tips of my thumbs touching, and set my hands on my lap. I was ready. I began to breathe deeply and purposefully.

Even before the initial bell was struck to mark the beginning of the forty minutes, my quads began to burn, I felt a strain in both knees, and my ankles tightened up like a rubber band held taut. I shifted slightly from time to time, wondering why I couldn't hear anyone else moving around in discomfort. Did they feel the way I did? I could focus only on the pain, and that only intensified the burn. I tried to stare at the wall and focus on my breathing. I had been told that the object of meditation was to empty your mind, but all I could think was PAIN, PAIN, OUCH, OUCH, PAIN, PAIN. How was I going to empty my mind of that mess? I thought, okay, I'm probably already halfway through. So I focused on the end, thinking about how great everything would be when I heard the final bell. That didn't work either. I tried counting the seconds, but time slowed down even more. All the while, the pain built, and I started to doubt I would make the full forty minutes. Not only did my legs feel miserable, but I was on the brink of madness. Then, someone struck the bell, and the session ended. Somehow I managed the forty minutes, probably due to constantly shifting my focus. I remember that focusing on my breathing set me most at ease. Afterwards, I still questioned the value of zazen. For me, it was

uncomfortable, frustrating, and limiting. All I thought about was the end. No gain seemed to come from it, not immediately, and I wanted results.

During the dharma talk that morning, Tesshin said something striking. “During sesshin, we sit ten times a day for forty minutes. People ask, ‘How can you do that all day? Doesn’t it hurt? Doesn’t it get boring?’ No, I tell them, because you don’t have to do it all day. You just have to do it that moment—every moment.” It was a beautiful mentality, but it didn’t exactly translate. I remember thinking, *yeah that’s great, but I can never see myself actually doing that, or even believing that*. For the rest of the semester, I only attempted to meditate on my own once or twice, and only for five minutes at a time.

Then, in the summer of 2008, I visited Ryumonji Zen Monastery during summer angō (“dwelling in peace”), a three-month period of intensified training at the monastery. Coincidentally, I had arrived on the weekend of sesshin (“gathering of mind”), a short period, varying from one to seven days, devoted almost exclusively to zazen practice. I arrived in the middle of a three day sesshin, and planned to stay through the week. Tesshin had encouraged me to stay a week to experience the monastic tradition of Soto Zen Buddhism. I, of course, was hesitant, but I trusted him. The abbot of Ryumonji, Shoken Winecoff, was Tesshin’s teacher. He had studied under Katagiri Roshi, a monk from Japan who founded the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center in 1972. After Katagiri Roshi’s death in 1990, Shoken continued to carry out Katagiri’s vision of expanding traditional Soto Zen Buddhism in the Midwest. Ryumonji was part of that vision.

I felt nervous entering Ryumonji. Men and women with shaved heads strode barefoot through the halls of the Kuin (the residential facility for teachers and guests).

Many wore black robes. Some wore dark, loose clothing, while I still had on jeans and a t-shirt. I wandered around looking for someone to speak with. I didn't have a clue as to what I should be doing.

Settling in, I discovered, was the easy part. Two of the caretakers provided me with a towel, a sleeping bag, and a pillow, and directed me to the Hondo (Buddha hall) where I would be spending the night because the bunks were filled. For the time being, they said, I could use the bathroom downstairs to change and get situated. The same afternoon I had the privilege of watching a shuso ceremony, a ceremony to install the head monk of the training period. Monks, several lay-ordained Buddhists, and a couple students all gathered in the Hondo for the ceremony. I watched the shuso endure an extensive inquisition filled with what sounded like Koans. Following the ceremony, we enjoyed an informal brunch. Just when I began to relax, we returned to the sesshin schedule. The shuso ceremony had been only a temporary celebration.

During my first twenty four hours at Ryumonji, I meditated for eight, a duration that far surpassed my original record of forty minutes, which I had done only once. Most of the eight hours were two, forty minute sittings, back to back, with a short kinhin (walking meditation) in between. My first sitting was tolerable, because I didn't know what to expect. But, that didn't stop that familiar ache in my thighs and in my ankles, reminiscent of my last forty minute sitting with Tesshin. The ten minute kinhin allowed me stretch my legs and knees and back as we slowly circled the altar, but I knew the relief was only temporary. I returned to my zafu and zabuton, peering at those around me, hopeful someone would grab a chair to do their sitting, so I would feel comfortable with that possibility if the pain became too great. Again, about twenty minutes into the

sitting, the pain came back, all through my legs. I thought my knees would never be the same. I started counting seconds, hoping the bell would sound. I waited, and I waited. No sound. I tried to count my breaths, and suspend any form of thinking. Then my nose began to itch. *I won't scratch it, I can't. Discipline yourself*, I thought. *This is why you're here*. And the battle commenced for the next twenty minutes—my mind fighting the pain in my body, and the urge to scratch my nose or my chin.

Over the next twenty-four hours, I dreaded every single zazen sitting. I went jogging that afternoon to loosen up for the evening zazen. I awoke early the next morning to stretch out my back and legs. And still, every sitting was a struggle. My body hurt. I was frustrated. Zazen pushed me to a point of mental anguish I have rarely experienced. But after three days, the anguish slowly transformed into strength. I can't explain what changed after three days. Maybe it was only a shift in perception, because zazen never became any easier. I still dreaded it, and I wasn't hopeful that it would become any easier, especially after one of the monks mentioned that zazen still wasn't easy for him, and he'd been practicing for thirty years. Whatever had changed, I welcomed, because I suddenly reached a higher level of mental discipline and concentration, and each consecutive sitting taught me something new.

My first lesson involved my perception of pain and discomfort during zazen. After so many sitting, I transcended the pain, and I transcended the spontaneous itches. Pain became a state of mind. I focused my mind on "living in the moment." I remembered what Tesshin said back during my first sitting—you don't have to meditate for forty minutes, you meditate each moment. I began to comprehend the moment; I became capable of perceiving my existence in the very moment I was in. Within each

moment, there was no future to yearn for or be anxious about, and there was no past to compare the moment to. The pain I once perceived became arbitrary. While I sat on the zafu and the burning rippled through my thighs, I began to concentrate on that pain, conceiving of what I truly felt. In effect, I ceased to feel the pain. I felt a pressure in my thigh, but the ache vanished. I directed my focus back to my breathing.

When I first began zazen, my prior conditioning urged me to seek immediate gratification, rather than to endure. When my mind registered some pain or an itch, I knew I could move or scratch and life would be better. By comparing my discomfort to the lack of pain in the past, and by conceiving the end of suffering in the future, I felt miserable—I knew there was relief. This bred desire. But in the moment, separated from ego, my nose itched, yes, but it didn't itch *me*, or irritate *me*, it just was. My legs ached, but they didn't hurt *me*, they just were. And I breathed. The wind blew outside. The bees buzzed. The clouds moved across the sky.

When I was finally able to separate myself from the mental chatter, I knew I had had another breakthrough. At the beginning of each period of zazen, my mind was filled with chatter. My first response was always, okay, just focus on your breathing, or on the wall in front of you, or even on the pain. Try to empty your mind. The method had worked before. And yet I struggled every sitting. It was a constant battle—bombardment of thoughts, rigorous focus, more thoughts, more focus, thoughts, focus—the cycle continually repeating. Then during one session, I stopped fighting. A barrage of thoughts entered my mind and instead of trying to focus on something else and empty my mind, I observed my thoughts coming and going, as if I were standing near a railway while trains passed. I felt the same sort of Doppler Effect. At first the thoughts were



loud and intense, and then they drifted farther away until they faded altogether. I almost burst into laughter. For so long that mental chatter had governed my life. When I was able to break free from those thoughts and still exist, I realized how insignificant the chatter really was. It had no direct effect on my existence, not in the present moment. The chatter only became significant if I became attached to it.

After leaving the monastery, I continued to meditate. One overcast afternoon, I sat zazen on my back porch and absorbed the surroundings. I heard the birds, felt the wind, and smelled the flowers. I perceived of these things through the senses, and they existed because sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell constituted my reality. In the same respect, I existed through the sensory. This was one form of existence.

When I evaluate and qualify that which enters my sensory perception, I realize I am creating distance from my immediate experience. When I think flowers are beautiful, or the wind refreshing, or the birds inspiring, my reality is determined by my ego. A flower is beautiful because I perceive it to *be beautiful* and have thus created a qualitative realm of existence. Suddenly the flowers and the wind and the birds become something more—something meaningful because of *how* we perceive them, instead of just *that* we perceive them. And as a result, this qualifying of our immediate reality reinforces *our* existence, because everything we interpret reflects *us*, and everything we discuss, we do so in relation *to us*. Our egos perceive in this way and give *us* meaning. And this is another form of existence.

I have come to realize that existence depends entirely on perception. The universe is far too complex to be understood by a dualistic mode of thinking—of being *this way* or *that*, or of perceiving ‘self’ as somehow apart from the rest of the universe.

And if we transcend this dualistic mind, something possible while sitting zazen, we get a glimpse of an egoless existence. We become just another entity in the universe. We reach the same plane of existence as other plants and animals, where we are all connected and quite possibly the same thing. In an egoless state, all of our attachments can be stripped away, and we can truly tap into *being*.

9.

Return to Fundamentals, Back to Source



*“Returning to the source,  
Takes time and energy*

*Transcending the senses  
Is the same as never having any,  
In a world of dynamics—*

*Where the wind sweeps up  
both seeds and fallen leaves.”*

The parable of the oxherder describes the quest for enlightenment. The Japanese Buddhist term for enlightenment is *satori*, an awakening often experienced suddenly and intuitively. D.T. Suzuki, the famous Japanese author, describes *satori* as “acquiring a new viewpoint for looking into the essence of things.” He goes further to explain, “Whatever the definition, *satori* means the unfolding of a new world hitherto unperceived in the confusion of a dualistic mind.” Suzuki mentions two fundamental ideas in his definition: perception and mind. *Satori* exists through perception, and perception exists through mind. The search for enlightenment, as described in the oxherder, becomes a

quest. Yet, *satori* is simply a condition of the mind, a shift in perception. It does not require any search. In fact, searching often inhibits that final realization.

The fundamental flaw in striving for *anything* is that the action suggests some external goal—we strive *for* something. I was striving to abandon ego, which is fundamentally an internal struggle. I approached my goal through the external. I sought nature and moved into the woods, and then hiked for five months. I experimented with psychedelics. I practiced zazen and visited a Soto Zen Buddhist monastery. I endeavored to reach some enlightenment through these experiences, only to find what I already knew—that the struggle begins and ends with the individual. True discovery resides within. As Wuxue Zuyuan said in the thirteenth century, “Why go riding on an ox in search of an ox?”

In the fall of 2008, I lived in a camper which sat on the bed of my 1998 Ford Ranger truck. I spent most of my nights a few miles outside the city of Marquette, Michigan. I used the parking lots of hiking trails and fishing spots, which lay off a wilderness highway that wound north along the Lake Superior shoreline. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of September, I awoke at 4:30 in the morning and couldn’t fall back asleep. The day was not particularly special, but I was awake before sunrise, and that was. And so, I decided to try and catch the sunrise from Sugarloaf Mountain, a nearby mountain peak, since I had parked less than a mile away. I hopped on my bicycle in the deep gray light of the approaching dawn, and pedaled up the road to the trail head. I turned on my headlamp and hiked the half mile to the summit.

The summit howled and shook. High winds passed through the trees, and rode up and whipped across the granite face of the mountain. When I reached the look-out point,

I sat down on one of the benches. It was that magical time of morning where there was no visible source of light, but all shades of white and gray were visible. I pulled my arms back through my coat and shirt sleeves and warmed them against my bare chest, and then turtled up, withdrawing my chin and nose as best as I could behind the zipped-up collar of my jacket. I periodically checked the clock on my phone, which read 5:30 by the time I was settled. The sunrise was scheduled for 6:15.

I sat and waited for the glowing orb to emerge over the deep blue horizon of Lake Superior. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the world brightened and came alive. Trees, leaves, the mountain, the sky and the lake, all shades of gray, turned pale and pastel, then vibrant greens and blues and reds and oranges. The world transformed from traditional to contemporary, from two-dimensional to three-dimensional. Off on the horizon, a sentinel of clouds loomed across the sky. At first, I could only see blue from behind the clouds. At around 6:00, the horizon began to glow red, weak at first, but slowly magnifying, stretching out from behind the clouds with orange and yellow in pursuit. The sun illuminated the clouds in pink, but mottled and soiled in gray, like the clouds had sat too long beside a highway. The red deepened, and shades of violet and aqua stretched across the sky, touching the tips of oranges and yellows. But the sun stayed hidden. By 6:30, a mosaic of the visible spectrum reached halfway into the sky above. The horizon was cotton candy, full of distinct color striations and florescent shades.

I guess the scene was nice. There were some pretty colors, but it was nothing extraordinary. On a clear day, the sky was always full of color. I wanted the sun. I expected the sun. However, the glowing orb never materialized. No rays of light burst from the where the sky collided with Lake Superior. No shimmering light skipped across

the water. Where was that perfect golden beacon I suffered all morning for, waking early, hiking the mountain, and then shivering in the cold for more than an hour? I gave up waiting at 7:00 am. Annoyed and cold, I ran down the mountain, hopped on my bike, and returned to camp.

Later that evening, I met a group of friends out at the local brewery for pints. Somewhere between pale ale and blueberry wheat, Kyle and Teague started discussing that morning's sunrise. They had both been awake for it.

"What sunrise?" I asked. "The sun never rose. Not that I could see. And I was on top of Sugarloaf." I was emphatic with disappointment.

"It was incredible. Didn't you see all of those colors?" Teague said. Kyle agreed. They both thought the sunrise was beautiful. I tried to argue with them, that it was anti-climatic and lame, far from perfect. And while listening to them and reevaluating my own experience, I experienced a kind of *satori*—a sudden and brief shift in perception. My inclination to defend my opinion evaporated, and instead I felt embarrassed and slightly wounded. I sat in my chair trying to retrieve the disappointment I had felt only moments before, but I couldn't. Everything changed in that moment. I understood what Teague and Kyle saw and felt—the sunrise *was* beautiful. And I understood my own attitude—the sunrise was not as beautiful as I *expected* and so I had been disappointed. Yet, neither perception determined what the sunrise actually *was*. Prior to that brief exchange with Teague and Kyle, my perception revolved around expectations. I had been considering the sunrise throughout the day which had only stoked my frustration. My disappointment had nothing to do with the quality of sunrise; it had to do with *me*, *my* perception.

In that moment, I was not searching for anything. Unlike my quest to abandon ego through externals, this enlightenment came suddenly and unexpectedly. It was not dramatic, but it provided clarity about the role my ego had in setting expectations. And once I realized that, I was able to move forward.

Near the end of J.D. Salinger's short story, "Teddy," the ten-year-old protagonist and an older man of thirty have a brief exchange regarding perception. Teddy initiates the subject: "Colors are only names. I mean if you tell them the grass is green, it makes them start expecting the grass to look a certain way—*your* way—instead of some other way that may be just as good, and maybe much better . . . I don't know." The older man argues that Teddy's way of thinking would raise "a little generation of ignoramuses," but Teddy responds, "Why? They wouldn't any more be ignoramuses than an elephant is. Or a bird is. Or a tree is. Just because something *is* a certain way, instead of just behaves a certain way, doesn't mean it's an ignoramus." Teddy treads on the "essence of things" that Suzuki describes. Through the simple example that colors impose expectations, Teddy offers a new perspective on both perception and existence. Because colors define our reality, the older man regards Teddy's perception as ignorant. Teddy's transcendence of logic bothers the older man because he is trapped within his expectations of what the world is *supposed* to be.

When I embarked on a quest to abandon ego, I was struggling with what I expected the world to be. And so I searched through externals. I had a goal in mind. Because of that goal, the journey was flawed from the very beginning. Nevertheless, the steps along the way were crucial, and each one helped me grow in some way. In entering the unfamiliar, I discovered allies: nature and mushrooms and meditation. Without the

external allies, I may have never found my path. And once I embarked on the journey, each experience provided another lesson that led to something more.

My experiences as a child opened my perception to the infinite, and to the power of my dualistic mind. My struggle with OCD taught me that although the mind can seem filled with chaos, it can be disciplined through awareness and determination. My experience at the car wash with Duncan exposed me to Zen and helped build my confidence in talking about what I cared about instead of fitting in and building my reputation. Spain served as the stage for one of the most altering events in my life, and I discovered I was looking for myself (whatever I perceived *me* to be), through someone else. J.D. Salinger taught me about Zen philosophy and ego in his writing, and through his life story he helped me believe that abandonment of ego was possible, and so I entered the woods. Camping in the woods for a semester helped me appreciate my essential needs. I learned the beauty of deliberate living. Returning to basics revived my kinship with nature, and I realized that *things* do not determine the 'self.' Hiking the Appalachian Trail taught me the beauty of living each and every moment, and of the fundamental relationship between expectations and perception. My initial experience with mushrooms expanded my perception to the radical notions that Terrence McKenna writes about, which led to my spiritual journeys with psychedelics. The spiritual journeys helped me recognize how perception determines reality, which allowed me to transcend my narrow perception of reality. Transcending that narrow perception led me to accept the prevalence of ego. Ego was keeping me from attempting meditation. Meditation helped me realize that what I was looking for was present the entire time. I would never truly find what I wanted through an external, however helpful the ally may



be. I could get close, but never to the core, never to that asterisk on the napkin of the human construct that David had drawn for me the night we drank Two-Hearted Ales in a hotel bar. But without the experiences, I never would have been ready to seek within. And through seeking within, I discovered a willingness to explore life and everything that surrounds me. And so, the journey came full circle. I searched the external, which directed me within, where I discovered a new perception of the external I am part of. It required a suspension of expectations more than anything.

I still have trouble with suspending my expectations. I still find myself comparing to the past, or anxiously awaiting the future. Even with writing this collection of essays, I struggle most with what I want the manuscript to become. This is a consequence of years of habitually forming expectations that generally failed to satisfy me. I grew up a little perfectionist, and I worked things up to such a level that they became unreal. I was constantly trying to understand and define everything. I was searching for control instead of just appreciating what existed. Perhaps through my journey to lose ego, I have learned to abandon expectations and to live in the present. Perhaps I have realized the importance of existing with what exists. Perhaps I've discovered myself as part of the universe, not a man in control of it.

Just as zazen sits at the core of Zen Buddhist practice, it became central in my quest to abandon ego. Before practicing meditation, I wanted to lose ego but did not have a definitive grasp on what ego was. I defined ego as my desire to be someone unique, to have a reputation, and to feel accepted. I didn't know who or what I was, so I thought I'd be happy if other people determined that for me. I was wrong. That method was too

dynamic, too dependent, and it would never get me closer to that core. Instead it led to suffering. Zazen seemed to fit all the broken pieces together.

When I revisit those childhood experiences staring at the rungs beneath the top bunk, falling into the infinite, I think I might have been in some form of meditation. All I knew as a boy was that all I had considered to be reality was stripped away. The only thing left was my mind in a vast empty void. Now, I have ventured to the infinite through other mediums, through psychedelics and meditation, which was necessary for me because my mind was not as capable as it was during childhood.

In the documentary, “How to Cook Your Life,” the tenzo (head chef) at the San Francisco Zen Center recalls a poem his mother wrote before she died. In the poem, she creates an image of a duck floating in the ocean. Although the duck is unaware of the size of the body of water, it bobs along, content in the water of the infinite.

As a child, I was frightened by the infinite, quite aware and terrified of the boundless expanse. Perhaps I still am. But I think most of my fear lies in my perception of the infinite, and in my lack of understanding of just what that infinite *is*. And if the fear resides within my perception, then I can fix that. I can alter that perception.

Maybe the infinite exists in our core being. Maybe that is where the drugs guide us to, where meditation takes us to completion after enough practice. Maybe in losing ego and reaching our core being, we find solidarity with the universe, with everything around us. But only through reaching that core, in casting the ego off temporarily, do we realize our interdependence. Not *believe* in it, or *believe* that it exists, but *realize* it in our core. Then the infinite is not some external dark abyss, but something *within* and something that we *are*.

10.

Returning to the City



*“He returns to the city after walking alone—  
He is barefoot and shirtless,  
His ankles, dirt-laden, there’s dust on his cheeks.*

*He smiles and listens to the crickets  
Trill into the evening—*

*And even without the magic powers of gods,  
they will trill again tomorrow.”*

The quest of the oxherder describes a personal quest, as depicted in the first nine poems and sketches of the oxherder. Each one of us may search and struggle with this ox on our own. I struggled with ego, my overwhelming awareness of self that dictated my perception of reality. But again, all of this was personal.

The tenth poem and sketch, however, broaden in scope and significance. “Returning to the City” refers to an individual taking the enlightenment gained during the quest and returning to the city to help end suffering in others. Be that as it may, the story of the oxherder is a parable, an allegorical quest. How does this translate into our lives? Who returns to the city? Can personal enlightenment be applied to society?

Again, we return to perception. In Salinger's novella, *Raise Hign the Roofbeams*, Carpenter, Seymour, describes something his younger brother Zooey mentioned on a quiz show:

*Zooey was in dreamy top form. The announcer had them off on the subject of housing developments, and the little Burke girl said she hated houses that all look alike—meaning a long row of identical 'development' houses. Zooey said they were 'nice.' He said it would be very nice to come home and be in the wrong house. To eat dinner with the wrong people by mistake, sleep in the wrong bed by mistake, and kiss everybody goodbye in the morning thinking they were your own family. He said he even wished everybody in the world looked exactly alike. He said you'd keep thinking everybody you met was your wife or your mother or father, and people would always be throwing their arms around each other wherever they went, and it would look 'very nice.'*

Love, in general, is conditional. We love different people in different amounts. The most enduring form of love is generally shared between family members, or with close friends who feel like family. This is the closest thing to pure love that many of us know. But *pure* love is fundamentally boundless and unconditional and freely given. Given the hypothetical situation Zooey describes, we would unknowingly love everyone as intensely as our mother or father. He explains the situation as a physical change in our perception (i.e. everyone looks the same), because as desirable a world as that might be, we are incapable of such a dramatic shift. Love is stratified because we choose it to be.

I used to determine how I felt about a person based on how they felt about me. It was a method of self-preservation. I wanted to be liked and accepted, and when for some reason I failed to win someone's affection, I transformed my inadequacies and bruised ego into mutual dislike. I simply ushered those people out of my life and lived safely within a bubble in which my perception of self was flawless.

In Buddhism, the term bodhisattva refers to a being who foregoes nirvana until all human suffering ceases. Bodhisattvas regard the communal well-being above the

individual, and yet every individual is just as important as everyone else. While many people seek to consume the positive forces in the universe while ridding themselves of the negative, bodhisattvas willingly absorb the negative and project the positive.

We are a tribal and social species, and part of the human condition is a desire for acceptance. There is nothing wrong with that. Interactions with others enrich our human experience. But for me, my perception of acceptance was skewed. I searched for acceptance and consumed the positive in order to feel better about myself. Otherwise, I didn't understand why I mattered. I didn't think about recycling that energy back into the world. All I wanted to do was hold on to it, to control it. Then I realized something: acceptance was inevitable if I shifted my perception. If I accepted everyone else, if, essentially, I loved everyone else and projected that energy and love outwardly, the rest would take care of itself. If dislike provokes mutual dislike, why wouldn't the same rule apply to love?

On December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2008, my brother and sister-in-law had a baby, a beautiful six pound baby girl with blue eyes and dark hair, just like her mother and father. The last time I saw her she was just over two months old—that magical age of curiosity and fascination with the world, and also of complete dependency on others. She was not especially entertaining, though all babies are inherently fascinating, but I noticed that she had acquired two new behaviors besides the eating and sleeping I was familiar with. First, one morning while I cradled her in my arms, she repeatedly yawned these tiny yawns, which made her appear no more or less human than anyone I've ever seen yawn—her arms and legs outstretched and reaching, her mouth rolling open and around

with the spasm, and her lips softly smacking together several times following the yawn. Second, she had started to smile. Every time she yawned or smiled, a sensation of interconnectedness came up sharp and quick, and I loved this baby for no other reason than for what she was—another living being. I felt no disconnect, no remove from this being. A baby wasn't some cute thing that people love to hold and take pictures of, or what married couples decide to have after achieving financial stability. A baby was another human, another very real human.

However, the baby was also a symbol. She was a symbol of love, and everyone around her loved her without condition. She didn't strive for that love, but we loved her nonetheless because we could not help but love her. All she had to do was exist. She was a symbol of life and purity and perfection, and yet she drooled and spit up at will. She farted and pooped and peed, sometimes all over bedspreads and sheets. She cried when she wanted, regardless if the place was public or private. And no one judged her. Of course she was a baby and that was what babies do. But she never seemed to care either. I admired her shamelessness. I admired her conviction. She seemed to possess some great knowledge of what is truly important. And this fascination stems from a realization that this state does not last. At some point, we begin to value our image and how we represent ourselves more than anything else. I have sat and pondered this at length, never to any end, but one thing always comes to mind.

During a visit to Flagstaff, Arizona, I met a young lady who told me the Navajo people do not use mirrors to help infants and toddlers gain a sense of self or for any purpose during early child development. Mirrors are strictly forbidden. The young lady was a social worker and helped new mothers with prenatal planning and childrearing.

Due to the diversity in Flagstaff, a mix of Hispanic, white, and Native American, she was aware of the many differences between cultures.

The day before, my cousin Mike and I had driven through Wupatki National Monument, where the remains of Anasazi and Sinagua pueblos from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are located. We traveled along a winding asphalt highway through the landscape, with the desert unraveling around us into a vast sea of crumbled orange and red rock scattered with clumps of sagebrush. In the distance, the Painted Desert stretched across the horizon, undulating in waves of heat. Great mesas loomed in the foreground. We turned off on a dusty unnamed road and bounded over desert flora, sand traps, and dried rivers. We were looking for “Inscription Point,” a sacred place of the Anasazi and Sinagua tribes.

Mike had only been to “Inscription Point” once before, and on that trip he was with a group led by a Native familiar with the area. This time we had no guide, and we had no map. All we had was a vague memory, and Mike’s instinct. Even having visited the place before, Mike explained that the site was so nondescript that our chances of reaching the destination were slim. After an hour searching, I was ready to give up. Mike wasn’t. He backed up the truck, turned left onto a different two-track overgrown with sagebrush, and drove about a mile through more of the same dust and dirt. Then he cut the engine at the foot of a great mesa.

I didn’t understand why he stopped at this place. It looked identical to the other mesas we had driven by—dozens of enormous boulders strewn at the foot of the mesa; the same dry arid land; the same crumbled rock and dust. When we exited the vehicle and inspected the boulders more closely, I understood. Hidden amid thousands of acres

of unmarked desert, we had actually stumbled upon an ancient art gallery filled with hundreds of petroglyphs. Symbols, shapes, and figures were inscribed on the dark glossy patina of wind-beaten boulders. The etchings, still clearly visible, were believed to be Anasazi, some 800 to 1000 years old.

We explored silently. Carvings were everywhere. Some depicted humans hunting birds, lines of people dancing, ceremonies, and symbols representing altered states of consciousness: rams, long serpentine shapes and spiraling coils, and human-like caricatures with huge hands and feet. One carving depicted a figure with a staff raised towards a mass of intertwining tentacles. We had stumbled upon relics, clues encoded in rock about the mysteries of the past, of a lost but not forgotten culture.

Since “Inscription Point” lies on the Navajo reservation, the government has no jurisdiction over the site. Since the place is sacred to the Navajo, they have done nothing to alter the site. No tourism exists there, but no protection exists either. With no protection, the petroglyphs had become vulnerable to vandals. Several of the carvings had been chipped away or scraped over, sacred artistry destroyed by the slight stroke of a stone or knife. Mixed among the ancient carvings were contemporary imitations: “N.j.,” “1956 ARIS—,” and “D + S forever,” with the date scribbled below. These were exactly like the markings I’ve found on park benches and picnic tables. I’ve carved similar messages into old climbing trees. The inscriptions were all too familiar, yet so much different than the Anasazi petroglyphs.

The Anasazi petroglyphs portrayed a way of life. They carved hunting scenes, ritual ceremonies, animals of the natural world, altered states of consciousness, and sacred symbols. The carvings represented a people and culture indivisible from the land



and from the sacred. The carvings preserved *what* this culture was, *what* these people were. There was no sign of individuality, no indication of who created the artwork.

The twentieth century imitations revealed names, initials, and dates. Whoever carved those inscriptions wanted to preserve their own place in time. These carvings attempted to record *who* a person was. And in desperately striving for immortality in a piece of wood or rock, the individual only created more isolation, more distance from *what* he is and where he fits into the universe.

How do we account for the difference? One represents a people; the other represents an individual. One signifies the universe and the cycles of the earth and its inhabitants. The other celebrates the individual and reflects an individualistic society flooded in ego. The difference, mainly, lies in perception, in how each culture regards themselves and the world around them. In *Sacred Hoop*, Paula Gunn Allen refers to a Lakota shaman named Lame Deer who explains, “We Indians live in a world of symbols and images where the spiritual and the commonplace are one. To [the white man] symbols are just words, spoken or written in a book. To us they are part of nature, part of ourselves, even little insects like ants and grasshoppers. We try to understand them not with the head but with the heart, and we need no more than a hint to give us the meaning.”

Many Native American cultures use symbols like a sacred hoop or a spider web to explain the universe. Both represent the interconnectedness of all life and all beings. If one fiber of the web breaks, the entire web unravels. In her book, *Molded in the Image of a Changing Woman*, scholar Maureen Trudelle Schwarz describes the Navajo worldview according to the principle of synecdoche, regarding a part of something as representative

of the whole. The Navajo consider everything they come into direct contact with as part of a collective whole, which includes plants, animals, and all aspects of the cosmos. They are brought up with the belief that phenomena like earth and sky and sun and water are living kin. There is no duality—no ‘them’ independent of the world they inhabit. Interdependence is the basis for their entire worldview.

Western culture has a much different worldview. We think of profit before sustainability. We promote competition instead of altruism. We value individuality over communality. We surround ourselves with things instead of people. Consequently, our concept of identity has shifted. Our culture does not encourage us to embrace *what* we are anymore, not like the ancient Anasazi, not under a principle of synecdoche. Now our culture promotes *who* we are, and *what* we own.

We develop our worldview as we grow up, which manifests from the values of our native culture, and from the people directly responsible for our upbringing. And we can trace these influencing factors to how we individually approach the world. Take mirrors for example. The Navajo culture forbids the use of mirrors. White American culture encourages the use of mirrors to help newborns gain a sense of self, recognize emotional response through facial expression, and learn the connection between body and mind. This is just one small difference, but I believe it deserves some attention, if only to speculate about the potential effects on worldview. Now, granted, the use of mirrors promotes important stages of growth in children. However, in using mirrors, newborns learn everything in the context of “self,” and there is a danger in how that context affects their perception of the world. With mirrors, there is a risk that children learn to perceive themselves as isolated and singular, which is absolutely terrifying and lonesome. And it

is also possible, that as we grow up, in order to compensate for this isolation, we relate to the world in an egotistical manner. Because we are unfamiliar with a wider perception of the world, this ego validates our perceived singular existence. The more we depend on this ego, and the more we fuel it through externals, the farther we travel out from the core of our being—farther from our true Buddha nature.

When I embarked on my quest to catch and tame and eventually transcend the ox, I thought it would provide the answer. In a way, the quest has provided many answers, but “the answer” still eludes me. And I’m okay with that. I do know that we need ego because it is indivisible from our human experience. Ego is part of human nature. This is what makes us such a beautiful species, a species capable of art and poetry and passion and romantic love and heartbreak. However, we must realize that ego destroys just as it creates, and the scope of this destruction is vast.

I also know that venturing to an egoless realm of existence is necessary from time to time—regardless if it is reached through meditation, psychedelics, sensory deprivation, ritual dances, kinship with the natural world, living in the moment, or something else—necessary because it widens our perception of the universe and our place within it. Necessary because perception constitutes our reality. Once we realize the role of perception, we can transcend that dualistic mode of thinking, and perceive of our existence as interdependent with all sentient beings. True enlightenment, true satori, true abandonment of ego, is simply realizing and adopting this wider perception. As N. Scott Momaday once wrote, “A thing is realized by means of perception, and not otherwise. Existence itself is illusory; we inhabit a dream in the mind of God.”

## ~AFTERWORD~

In revisiting my life and experiences through writing this collection, I have realized that all of my struggles have involved perception. This gives me hope. When I think of the possibility that individual perception contributes to the majority of the struggles in society, I perceive humanity as something beyond a violent, evil, hateful species. I see a species that hasn't yet reached the core essence of being, a species still operating among the outer layers of existence—an existence smothered in ego. However, one's perception is not static, which is why the oxherder parable is so sacred. Sacred in the sense that, by undertaking a similar quest, we can transcend our narrow perception, transcend our dualistic mode of thinking, and draw closer to pure love and pure being. And so, I continue with my quest . . .

*There are four types of people in life: those who spend their entire lives seeking to find; those who constantly distract themselves because they're afraid of what they'll find; those who don't seek because they feel they've already found; and those who continue to seek even though they've found.*

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